The New Criterion

April 2003

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

Notes & Comments, 1
Lessons from Juvenal *by Roger Kimball*, 4
Who was Simon Raven? *by Brooke Allen*, 9
Poets on poetry: a special section
Reflections by David Yezzi, 17; *Eric Ormsby*, 22;
Dick Davis, 28 & *Adam Kirsch*, 32
New poems *by Glyn Maxwell, David Barber, A. E. Stallings & Ben Downing*, 37

Letter from Paris: Anglo-saxon attitudes *by Theodore Dalrymple*, 44; **Theater:** Luck of the Irish? *by Mark Steyn*, 48; **Art:** "Manet/Velázquez" *by Karen Wilkin*, 53; Gallery chronicle *by James Panero*, 60; **Music** *by Jay Nordlinger & Patrick J. Smith*, 64; **The media** *by James Bowman*, 69
Books: *Donald Kagan* The Peloponnesian War *reviewed by Victor Davis Hanson*, 74; *Keith Windschuttle* The Fabrication of Aboriginal History *reviewed by Geoffrey Blainey*, 79; *John Derbyshire* Prime Obsession *reviewed by James Franklin*, 82; *Robert J. Stove* The Unsleeping Eye *reviewed by Anthony Daniels*, 84; **Letters**, 87

Volume 21, Number 8, $7.75

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lindy Guinness

Paintings

Louisa Matthiasdottir

[1917–2000]

Paintings

April 1 – April 26

CATALOGUES AVAILABLE

Salander-O'Reilly Galleries

20 East 79 Street New York 10021 Tel (212) 879-6606

Monday–Saturday 9:30 to 5:30

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

John Walker

Changing Light

March 13 – April 26, 2003

Catalogue with Text by Eliza Rathbone

Sally Michel

Milton Avery

A Portrait

April 24 – May 30, 2003

Lower Gallery

Knoedler & Company

– established 1846 –

19 East 70 Street New York New York 10021

Tel 212 794-0550 Fax 212 772-6932

www.knoedlergallery.com

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

BECOMING WEALTHY IS ONE THING.

STAYING WEALTHY IS ANOTHER.

THAT'S WHERE WE COME IN.

Caldwell Asset Management Inc.

Independent Investment Managers

450 Park Avenue, Suite 1900, New York, N.Y. 10022

(212) 220-4260

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The New Criterion *April 2003*

Editor & Publisher *Hilton Kramer*
Managing Editor *Roger Kimball*
Poetry Editor *Robert Richman*
Associate Editor *James Panero*
Assistant to the Editors *Cricket Farnsworth*
Technical Associate *Max Watman*
Editorial Intern *Dara Mandle*

Publisher 1982–1994 *Samuel Lipman*

Contributors to this issue

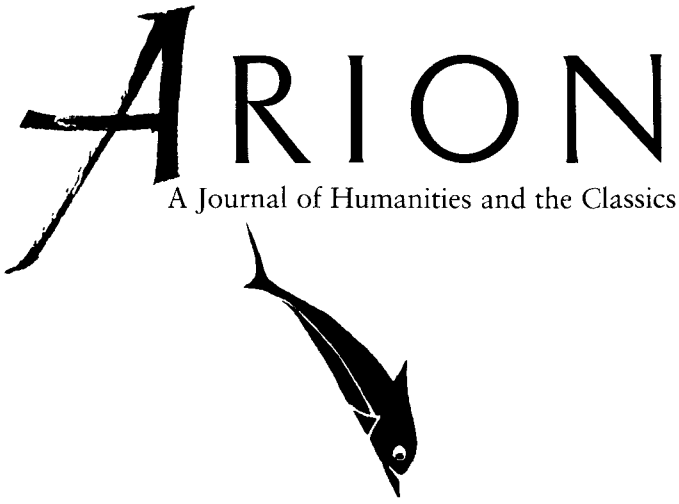
Brooke Allen reviews books regularly for *The New Criterion* and other publications.
David Barber is the author of *The Spirit Level* (TriQuarterly Books), a book of poems.
Geoffrey Blainey, one of Australia's best-known historians, held a chair at Harvard in the 1980s.
James Bowman is a resident scholar at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.
Theodore Dalrymple is a doctor, an author, and a contributing editor of *City Journal*.
Anthony Daniels is a doctor and writer.
Dick Davis's most recent book of poems, *Belonging* (Swallow Press), was chosen as a "Book of the Year" by *The Economist*.
Ben Downing's first book of poems, *The Calligraphy Shop*, will be published in the fall by Zoo Press.
James Franklin lectures in mathematics at the University of New South Wales, Sydney.
Victor Davis Hanson is at work on *War Like No Other*, a military history of the Peloponnesian War forthcoming from Random House.
Adam Kirsch, a book critic for *The New York Sun*, won the 2001 New Criterion Poetry Prize for his collection of poems *The Thousand Wells*.
Glyn Maxwell's most recent collection is *The Nerve* (Houghton Mifflin). He is the poetry editor of *The New Republic*.
Jay Nordlinger is the managing editor and music critic of *National Review*.
Eric Ormsby's most recent book is *Facsimiles of Time: Essays on Poetry and Translation* (The Porcupine's Quill).
Patrick J. Smith is a former editor of *Opera News*.
A. E. Stallings is an American poet residing in Athens, Greece.
Mark Steyn is the senior North American correspondent for Britain's Telegraph Group.
Karen Wilkin is the editor of *Ascending Peculiarity: Edward Gorey on Edward Gorey* (Harcourt Brace).
David Yezzi's collection of poems, *The Hidden Model*, is forthcoming from TriQuarterly Books in the fall.

Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. April 2003, Volume 21, Number 8. Subscriptions: $48 for one year, $88 for two. For Canada and Mexico, add $7 per year. Outside North America, add $14 per year. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster and subscribers: send change of address, all remittances, and subscription inquiries to The New Criterion, P.O. Box 3000, Denville, NJ 07834. Copyright © 2003 by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc. Newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., One Media Way, 12406 Rt. 250, Milan, OH 44846. (800) 221-3148. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date. *Internet:* www.newcriterion.com *Email:* letters@newcriterion.com

Advertising: Dawn Steeves *Telephone:* (212) 247-6980 *Email:* advertising@newcriterion.com.
Subscriptions: To subscribe, renew, or report a problem please call (800) 783-4903.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set in 10-point Galliard and is printed by Science Press in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, USA.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



The grand sequence of the classical tradition, which extends in various strands through the Middle Ages and Renaissance to the scientific Enlightenment and modern era, is actually a master paradigm for how to structure an authentically multicultural curriculum on a global scale. All students abroad as well as in the US need to learn the general contours of the world's major artistic and cultural traditions. These long channels of lineage can best be understood as streams—mighty rivers that are fed by tributaries and that are a confluence of mixed and varied material . . .

Camille Paglia, "The Mighty River of Classics"
Arion Volume IX, Number 2.

SAMPLE ARION AND SUBSCRIBE TODAY
WWW.BU.EDU/ARION

"More readable and more laudable than any other journal to come out of the academy in recent years."

—Times Literary Supplement

"Highly recommended for any library with a thinking public. There is enough material here to enliven anyone's view of the world."

—Library Journal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Notes & Comments: April 2003

Junk Mailer

Many readers will remember what *The New York Review of Books* was like in the late 1960s and 1970s. It carried many thoughtful articles on a wide variety of literary and intellectual matters. It also promulgated a virulently anti-American species of (in Tom Wolfe's perfect epithet) radical chic. Left-wingers like Stokely Carmichael, Noam Chomsky, Tom Hayden, Andrew Kopkind, Mary McCarthy, Jerry Rubin, and I. F. Stone contributed incendiary articles denouncing just about every aspect of American life. The nadir came in August 1967 when the *Review* published on its cover a large diagram instructing readers on the exact construction of a Molotov cocktail.

The *Review* never abandoned its programmatic left-wing bias. In the 1980s bitter and contemptuous articles about Ronald Reagan and Bush I were a regular feature; today the same sorts of things are directed at the younger Bush's administration. Nevertheless, if the *Review*'s politics haven't really changed, the volume and level of histrionics has been discernibly lower. Until recently.

Whatever else the preparations for war with Iraq have done, they have galvanized members of what we might call the Old New Left to an extent not seen since the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Like sharks that smell blood, they have whipped themselves into a dangerous frenzy. The media keeps reporting on the growth of an "anti-war" movement. But the real emotional fuel feeding the protestors is hatred of America and hatred of George W. Bush and his administration. The war with Iraq is merely an occasion, a rallying point. *The New York Review of Books*, always responsive to left-wing political trends, has joined the parade, reverting to an hysterical anti-American rhetoric not seen in its pages for many years. Exhibit A is "Only in America," a 7000-word diatribe by Norman Mailer in the March 27 number of the *Review*.

Mailer's essay, drawn from a speech he delivered to the Commonwealth Club in San Francisco, is a model Mailer production. That is to say, it is a stew of blustering incoherencies, dire prognostications, and savage indictments of the United States, highly seasoned by infusions of paranoia. This is not the place to review the preposterous career of Norman Mailer: the wife-stabbing erotomaniac, political activist, and conspiracy nut. It has always been a source of profound amazement to us that serious people could ever regard this noisy buffoon as an important novelist or thinker. But so they did, once upon a time. *That* story belongs to the history of intellectual credulousness. If Mailer's latest effusion in *The New York Review* is part of that history, it is also a specimen example of the new "anti" mood: anti-war-with-Iraq, at least inciden-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tally, but predominantly anti-Bush and anti-American.

Mailer begins by refighting the 2000 presidential election, alluding to President Bush's "investiture through an election that could best be described as legitimate/illegitimate. America," Mailer continues,

> had learned all over again that Republicans had fine skills for dirty legal fighting. They were able to call, after all, on a powerful gene stream. The Republicans who led the campaign to seize Florida in the year 2000 are descended from 125 years of lawyers and bankers with the cold nerve and fired-up greed to foreclose on many a widow's home or farm. Nor did these lawyers and bankers walk about suffused with guilt. They had the moral equivalent of teflon on their soul. Church on Sunday, foreclose on Monday.

Let's see, President Bush won a close election: why is that an "investiture"? Why is it "legitimate/illegitimate"? Where in heaven's name did those widows and greedy agents of foreclosure come from?

All this is merely throat-clearing, however. Mailer has two main purposes in this essay. One is to castigate middle America. "To be a mainstream American," he says "is to live as an oxymoron." And this, you see, is one reason for "the odd guilt so many felt after September 11. It was as if untold divine forces were erupting in fury." Really? Earth to Norman: what most Americans felt after September 11 was rage, not guilt, and it wasn't an "odd" rage, either. It was the perfectly justifiable rage any normal person feels when his country is attacked and 3000 innocent people are slaughtered by a gang of ravening lunatics.

None of that computes for Noman Mailer. In the aftermath of World War II, he writes, the United States was "exporting the all-pervasive aesthetic emptiness of the most powerful American corporations" to the rest of the world. "There were no new cathedrals being built for the poor—only sixteen-story urban-renewal housing projects that sat on the soul like jail." Let's see: would that be the urban housing we built for a war-devastated Europe and Japan? Like many leftists, Norman Mailer cannot abide the word "corporation." He concludes his essay by warning against "the lower existence of a monumental banana republic"—i.e., the United States—"with a government always eager to cater to mega-corporations as they do their best to appropriate our thwarted dreams with their elephantiastical conceits." A gold star for anyone who can untangle that elephantiastical conceit.

Mailer's second purpose in this essay is to expose President Bush's war plans as a secret effort to embark on the construction of a world empire. Yes, really: "George W. Bush's underlying dream," he says, is "Empire!" Mailer clearly thinks big, for by empire he doesn't mean an empire like those in the old days. He means world domination: "Behind the whole push to go to war with Iraq is the desire to have a huge military presence in the Near East as a stepping stone to taking over the rest of the world."

In some ways, reading Norman Mailer is like reading a pulp spy novel. There are plenty of conspiracies, hypocritical evil men in high places, and plans for world domination there, too. But no one offers those novels as serious commentary in America's most influential intellectual book review. In one particularly bewildering passage, Mailer explains how America's battle for world domination will also lead to puritanical sexual repression at home. Apparently, the military is scheduled to get in on the moral crusade, for Mailer goes on to observe that "Soldiers are, of course, crazier than any average man [but how about any average self-infatuated novelist?] when in and out of combat, but the overhead command is a major everyday pressure on soldiers and could become a species of most powerful censor over civilian life." *Three* gold stars for the hermeneutical genius that can unravel that.

Anyone who has followed Norman

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mailer's work knows that such incoherent ranting is par for the course for him. The real question is why any self-respecting editor would publish such stuff. We suppose that, in some circles, Mailer is still considered a "big name." Would that be enough to induce *The New York Review* to publish such unadulterated tripe? Perhaps. More likely, Mailer's effusion, for all its stuttering hyperbole, was judged to express the mood of the time. We fear that the editors of *The New York Review* might be correct about that. More's the pity if they are.

Politics and pedagogy

Possibly you have never heard of Citrus College. We confess that we were unacquainted with the community college in Glendora, California—until Professor Rosalyn Kahn catapulted the school to temporary notoriety last month. Professor Kahn is apparently one of those teachers who find it difficult to separate politics from pedagogy. Among her duties was teaching Speech 106, a "strongly recommended" course in "small group communication." This winter, the communication concerned war with Iraq. Professor Kahn offered her students an extra-credit assignment: write to President Bush to protest the war. Note well: the extra credit was available not for a well-written letter, but only for a letter protesting the war. It transpired that Professor Kahn made a similar assignment with a state senator as the designated recipient.

Now, many teachers will try to hone their students' rhetorical skills by asking them to argue for opposing sides of a contentious issue. Professor Kahn's purpose here was different. She was not endeavoring to sharpen her students' mastery of rhetoric and argumentation. On the contrary, she exploited her students in order to further a private political agenda.

We wonder how common is such blatant abuse of pedagogical authority and injection of politics into the classroom. It is difficult to say. We suspect that it is far more common than is generally thought. Professor Kahn's letter-writing campaign would never have been exposed had not some dissenting students contacted the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a Philadelphia-based organization dedicated to free speech and academic freedom: values that are conspicuously imperiled on many college campuses. FIRE's quick intervention sparked a strong response from the college, including a letter of apology to President Bush. We can hope that FIRE's action will also serve to remove Professor Kahn from the classroom. A news story reported that the college has required her to apologize to her students. A real apology would require her to leave academia altogether. Rosalyn Kahn has demonstrated contempt for her students and a failure to grasp the most elementary requirements of academic freedom. Why should she be welcomed back to the classroom?

Poets on poetry

The New Criterion has always taken a keen interest in contemporary poetry. We have published scores of essays on the work of contemporary poets and, since the spring of 1984, have published new poems or translations of poems in every issue. It is our judgment that the art of poetry is enjoying a vibrant renaissance. It seemed an opportune moment, then, to commemorate the life of contemporary verse. We asked David Yezzi, a former associate editor of *The New Criterion* and now the director of the Unterberg Poetry Center at the 92nd Street Y in New York, to edit a special section on poetry. He has put together a splendid selection of essays and poems for this issue. There is much to lament in contemporary culture. Mr. Yezzi reminds us that, in the world of poetry, at least, there is also much to celebrate.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Lessons from Juvenal

by Roger Kimball

It is difficult not *to write satire.*
—Juvenal, on the Rome of his day

J'ai en ce moment une forte rage de Juvenal. Quel style! quel style!
—Flaubert, in a letter of 1853

Satire, if it is to do any good and not cause immeasurable harm, must be firmly based on a consistent ethical view of life.
—Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*

Probably the most politically incorrect Roman poet, certainly the most caustic, was the satirist Decimus Junius Juvenalis—Juvenal to us. We expect satirists to expose hypocrisy, injustice, corruption. Juvenal does this. We also expect satirists to exaggerate, to caricature, to lampoon. Juvenal does this, too, in spades. But satire, like liquor, comes in a variety of flavors and potencies. There is mild satire, whose means are gentle and whose aim is comic. Gilbert and Sullivan are satirists in this sense, as, in his satirical forays, is Horace, Juvenal's meticulous, urbane precursor. Gentle satire pokes, but gingerly, in fun. Its goal is enlightenment, yes, but also laughter.

Juvenal belongs to a different tribe. When he pokes, he pokes hard, to hurt. His satire is bitter—an adjective that is never far from the poet's name. The phrase "savage indignation"—often in Latin—is another epithet unfailingly applied to Juvenal, though it does not, I believe, occur in his work. Jonathan Swift, a rival in acerb satire, employed it in his epitaph, which pictures him happy at having finally escaped the *saeva indignatio* that so lacerated his heart during his life. There are plenty of hilarious passages in Juvenal. But in the end, as F. H. Buckley notes in *The Morality of Laughter*, Juvenal's "savage indignation stifles our laughter." Juvenal aims primarily at the catharsis of exposure, only incidentally at justice and reform. The element of humor is but an intermittent companion to his verse.

Juvenal's signature disposition is rage—rage against women, foreigners, and pandering homosexuals; against cruel and decadent rulers, unresponsive patrons, uppity parvenus; against greed, pomposity, extravagance, vanity, innovation, stupidity, bad manners, and urban blight. Why write satire? "I will enlighten you," Juvenal tells us in his the first *Satire*:

> When a flabby eunuch marries, when well-
> born girls go crazy
> For pig-sticking up-country, bare-breasted,
> spear in fist;
> When the barber who rasped away at my
> youthful beard has risen
> To challenge good society with his millions;
> when Crispinus,
> That Delta-bred home-slave, silt washed down
> by the Nile—
> Now hitches his shoulders under Tyrian purple,
> airs
> A thin gold ring in summer on his sweaty finger

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

("My dear, I couldn't *bear* to wear my *heavier*
jewels")—
Why, then it is harder *not* to write satires;
for who
Could endure this monstrous city, however
callous at heart,
And swallow his wrath?

"Today every vice/ Has reached its ruinous zenith. So, satirist, hoist your sails."

Juvenal's loathing is visceral, breathtaking, unforgettable. His ninth *Satire* (he wrote sixteen altogether) is a conversation between Juvenal and an unpleasant, discarded rent-boy who rails against the perfidy and stinginess of his even more unpleasant former keeper. ("'I paid you so much *then*,' he says, 'and a bit more later, and more that other time.'") Gilbert Highet, the great classical scholar and an expert on Juvenal, called it "one of the most shocking poems ever written" but also "a masterpiece."

Highet is right on both counts. The shock stems not so much from overt obscenity. There are only a few passages that the Loeb deliberately euphemizes (only once, I believe, does it render Juvenal's Latin into Greek). Many classical poets outdo Juvenal in the deployment of four-letter words and the depiction of the actions they name. But no poet exceeds him in portraying the chilly perversion of human affections—not just sexual affection, but all the many forms of intimacy that bind us one to another. Juvenal was a connoisseur of contempt. But he was a dazzlingly eloquent connoisseur. His stinging hexameters glitter with linguistic brilliance and moral outrage. (They glitter, too, with a demanding vocabulary: of the 4790 words in the *Satires*, 2130 are *hapax legomena*.)

Who was Juvenal? We hardly know. If he wrote letters, none survives. For all their panoramic detail, the *Satires* contain only a handful of autobiographical tidbits. There are no contemporaneous accounts of Juvenal's life or work. He savaged his fellows; they responded with a consuming silence. In the introduction to his excellent translation of the *Satires* (Penguin, 1974), Peter Green notes that Juvenal is among the most elusive of classical writers. We do not know where he was born, or when. We do not know whether he was married (probably not), or whether he had children. Highet conjectures that Juvenal was or became homosexual, chiefly on the evidence of his fearful contempt for women. But "probably" is the best we can do about even basic signposts. Juvenal was probably born between AD 55 and 70, which is to say during or just after the reign of Nero (54–68): a period of ostentatious corruption and moral breakdown. He was probably born in Aquinum, a town about one hundred miles north of Rome. His father seems to have been a well-to-do Spanish freedman. It is possible that Juvenal saw military service in Britain—there are some scattered allusions to Agricola's campaign in the Orkneys (84–85) in the second *Satire*—and it seems likely that he embarked on a career in the civil service. Some speculate that he studied with the great rhetorician Quintilian (*c.* 35–*c.* 95).

Juvenal was obviously in and about Rome a good deal: his vivid, omnivorous descriptions of life there bespeak intimate knowledge of the city. He may have been exiled—possibly to Egypt—by Domitian around 92. If so, it may have been because Juvenal made a slighting remark about an actor called Paris, one of Domitian's favorites (until, that is, Paris was suspected of pursuing an affair with the emperor's wife, at which point he was promptly executed). Those who suffered exile had their property confiscated, which would explain Juvenal's bitter depictions of impoverished writers seeking favors from indifferent patrons.

Exile in Egypt would also help explain Juvenal's loathing for all things Egyptian (an animus he cordially extended to all things Greek). Would Domitian really have exiled someone simply for criticizing Paris? Probably not. Probably he would have had him executed. That, after all, is what he did to a poor chap who just happened to look

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like Paris. Ditto for some youths who put flowers on Paris's grave. Domitian was—or became by the end of his reign—a paranoid, murderous tyrant.

If Juvenal was exiled, he might well have been recalled when Nerva became emperor in 96 and issued a sort of general amnesty for those exiled by Domitian. The sixteen *Satires*—we possess a full fifteen and a fragment of the sixteenth—were probably begun in the late 80s. They amount to some four thousand lines of verse. Juvenal published them in five books between about 110 and 130—during, that is, the relatively benign reigns of Trajan (98–117) and Hadrian (117–138). The only contemporary reference to Juvenal is by his older friend Martial, "the fashionable social pornographer" (Green's phrase), who mentions Juvenal a couple of times in his *Epigrams*. In one epigram from the 80s, Martial called Juvenal "*facundus*," "eloquent," but he probably referred not to the *Satires* (as yet unpublished) but to Juvenal's skill at oratory. Juvenal mellowed with age. His last satires lack the biting invective and linguistic pyrotechnics of the first dozen. After a period of poverty, Juvenal seems (judging from some hints in the *Satires*) to have acquired a modest competence: a small farm at Tibur where he could quietly entertain a few friends.

Juvenal probably died shortly after Antonius Pius succeeded Hadrian in 138. The *Satires* seemed at first to have died with him. There is no mention of them at all for more than a century. Given Juvenal's xenophobia and suspicion of anything not properly Roman, it is ironical that his work should have been rediscovered first by Christian apologists in the fourth century. They mined the vein of Stoic resignation that courses through the *Satires*.

Once Juvenal entered the bloodstream of European literature, he stuck. Even today, in our amnesiac age, a good many bits of Juvenal are in general circulation, a surprising number in Latin. Everyone knows *panem et circenses*, the "bread and circuses" for which the public proverbially clamors, even if its origin in Juvenal's tenth *Satire* is forgotten. Likewise *rara avis* (from the sixth *Satire*) and *mens sana in corpore sano* (from the tenth). We know many other Juvenalian tags in English: the admonition that "he who travels light can sing in the face of a robber"; that "honesty is praised but freezes"; that "luxury is more deadly than an armed invader"; that a long peace brings special evils of its own; that parents should "abstain from things that they must condemn" lest their children copy them; that many—too many!—are afflicted by "an incurable itch for writing."

Some writers have responded to Juvenal's ferocity, others to his exquisite Latin, still others to the implicit vision of a cleaner, nobler, more honest society lurking behind his satire. Chaucer appropriates bits of Juvenal for the Wife of Bath's tale and *Troilus and Criseyde*. The famous French writer and aesthetician Nicolas Boileau (1636–1711) wrote satires modelled closely on Juvenal. Montaigne quoted him dozens of times. Donne greatly admired him. Dr. Johnson scored an early triumph with "London," a brilliant imitation of Juvenal's third *Satire*, whose permanent, language-transcending relevance to human affairs is illustrated by Johnson's transpositions:

> Forgive my transports on a theme like this
> I cannot bear a French metropolis.
> . . . . . .
> Obsequious, artful, voluble and gay,
> On Britain's fond credulity they prey.

Johnson returned to Juvenal in "The Vanity of Human Wishes," an imitation of the tenth *Satire*, and he told Boswell that he had considered translating or imitating yet others (though some, he noted, were too "gross" to be Englished).

Johnson seized upon the moral core of Juvenal. Others responded to different aspects of the *Satires*. Flaubert's "rage" for Juvenal was based partly on Juvenal's searing tone and his sharp, contrarian spirit: Emma Bovary could have won a starring role in the sixth *Satire*. But Flaubert was

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

also intoxicated by Juvenal's style ("Quel style! quel style!"), his astonishing mastery of diction, meter, and sound, his ability to use sound to mimic, to adumbrate sense. When Juvenal describes a belching courtier, he captures the eructation in his alternation of open vowels and percussive consonants. When a woman sobs, Juvenal's verse does, too. It's a wonderful feat and also, as one scholar crisply observed, "a translator's nightmare."

Juvenal has often been criticized for inattention to structure. His *Satires* are—some of them—less narratives proceeding in orderly procession from beginning through middle to the end than hectic digressions in which a cascading kaleidescope of ideas, images, and imprecations jostles for our attention. "All human endeavors," he says, "are the hotch-potch of my little book." Indeed, Juvenal's appetite for the circus of life competes with his urge to condemn its depredations. The third *Satire* poses—no, it is—a rejection of city life in favor of bucolic simplicity. But somehow the enthusiasm of Juvenal's rejection transforms his criticism into a cunning half-embrace. On the one hand, it's "farewell Rome"—there is

> No room for honest Romans when Rome's
> ruled by a junta
> Of Greek-born secret agents, who—like all
> their race—
> Never share friends or patrons.

And yet what follows is an evocation of Roman life so palpable, so teeming with life, that fascination triumphs over fastidiousness. For sheer *velocity*, few poets can match Juvenal. "Horace," Dryden wrote in his *Discourse Concerning Satire*, "is always on the amble, Juvenal on the gallop." Yet considered line for line, Juvenal is a prodigy of formal excellence, a Cellini in words. Hence the astute observation by one critic that Juvenal, despite his large canvas, was essentially a "miniaturist."

We should not be surprised that many of Juvenal's famous lines have outlived their original context and satirical point. We are all familiar with the question *quis custodiet ipsos custodies?* Today, we are most apt to encounter the phrase in a political context: who is looking after the politicians who are supposed to be looking after us? Juvenal, characteristically, applies the phrase to women: a man thinks to safeguard his wife's chastity by locking her in the house: "But who is to keep guard/ Over the guards themselves? They get paid in common coin/ To forget their mistresses' randy little adventures."

The *Satires* have something for—and something to offend—almost everyone. Two of Juvenal's *Satires*—the second and the ninth—dilate on homosexuality. They once were bowdlerized because of their subject and risqué bits. (The introduction to the Loeb Classical Library's Juvenal provides summaries of the *Satires*. Most are lengthy and detailed. About the ninth, however, the writer confines himself to the observation that "it deals with a disgusting offense, one of the main sources of corruption in the ancient world.") Today, these parts of Juvenal are more likely to be bowdlerlized (or attacked) because of what they ridicule than what they depict.

Then there is the issue of women. By far the longest, and in some ways the most vituperative, of the *Satires* is the sixth, which Juvenal devotes to a wide-ranging attack on the folly, for men, of marriage.

> Postumus, are you *really*
> Taking a wife? You used to be sane enough—
> what
> Fury's got into you, what snake has stung you
> up?
> Why endure such bitch-tyranny when rope's
> available
> By the fathom, when all those dizzying top-
> floor windows
> Are open for you, when there are bridges
> handy
> To jump from?

Juvenal did not have a narrow view of women. He does not, in this satire, portray

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

all wives as vicious termagants. Some are extravagant, drunken gossips; others are insatiable nymphomaniacs and/or cruel and domineering liars. A whorish unchastity, according to Juvenal, is the leading characteristic. Of course, one does occasionally come across an uncorrupted woman: she is (the famous phrase) a *rara avis*, as unusual as a black swan. But Juvenal is a tough chap to please: "Who could endure a wife that possessed all perfections?" Such rare birds are invariably "haughty, condescending prigs" who spoil virtue with pride.

Juvenal was not always on the attack. Probably his most thoughtful *Satire* is the tenth, the one that Johnson commemorated in "The Vanity of Human Wishes." Nothing that Juvenal wrote is gentle, exactly, but here we have Juvenal the teacher, not Juvenal the scourge. What is it that most of us ask of the gods (or call it fate, providence, fortune, luck . . .)? Money, power, fame, beauty, even a long life—Juvenal shows how these common desiderata are often the enemies of human happiness. We ask for money: we get it and find ourselves the prey of robbers and cheats. ("Increase his riches and his peace destroy.") We ask for power: we get it and find ourselves the object of murderous intrigues. A mother asks that her daughter be beautiful, her son handsome: they are, but they are also objects of the seducer's eye. Even a long life—what good is that when the torments and indignities of old age pile up and rob life of its zest? Is there nothing the prudent should ask of the gods? Juvenal has two answers. First his disclaimer:

> If you want my advice
> Let the Gods themselves determine what's
> most appropriate
> For mankind, and what best suits our
> various circumstances.
> They'll give us the things we need, not
> those we want: a man
> Is dearer to them than he is to himself.

But in the end Juvenal affirms the modest creed of the Stoics. Be wary of Fortune, for she is a fickle goddess, but if you must ask for favors, ask

> For a sound mind in a sound body, a valiant
> heart
> Without fear of death, that reckons longevity
> The least among Nature's gifts.
> . . . . . .
> there's one
> Path, and one only, to a life of peace—
> through virtue.
> Fortune has no divinity, could we but see it:
> it's we,
> We ourselves, who make her a goddess, and
> set her in the heavens.

A modest philosophy, but also an eminently humane one.

Kierkegaard observed that satire, to be useful, must emerge from a consistent view of life. In some respects, Juvenal is the least consistent of writers. As Peter Green noted, "if we try to pin down any coherent philosophy in Juvenal's work, we soon find ourselves forced to admit defeat." Nevertheless, Juvenal does exhibit a consistency of attitude. At the center of this attitude are two things: courage and an allergy to euphemism. One scholar described Juvenal as "a realist of the realists; he grapples with the real things of life." Satire is by nature one-sided. It exaggerates wildly. It is over-the-top. Anyone who has read the letters of Juvenal's contemporary Pliny knows how distorted Juvenal's view of the world was. Sir Paul Harvey spoke in this context of his "narrow pessimism which sees only the seamy side of life." Still, we indulge the distortions that satire deploys for the sake of the revelations it promises. We might not like some of the things that Juvenal tells us. But then we in the West pride ourselves on having finally achieved enlightenment about—oh, so many things! We are unburdened by many benighted prejudices that crimped the souls of our ancestors. And how much better we think of ourselves on account of our liberations. If nothing else, Juvenal may help temper that self-satisfaction.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Who was Simon Raven?

by Brooke Allen

Novelists who achieve a cult status write, by definition, for a narrow and usually specialist readership, and while their books are not for everyone, they attract certain passionate partisans. One cult figure, the English novelist, journalist, and television writer Simon Raven (1927–2001), did not reach a mass audience or even attain a very broad readership among the upper middle class and the intelligentsia; but then, he never exerted himself very far to do so. "I've always written for a small audience consisting of people like myself," he remarked, "who are well-educated, worldly, skeptical and snobbish (meaning that they rank good taste over bad). And who believe that nothing and nobody is special."

"People like myself": there are few of them left, for Raven was one of a breed that was dying in his youth and is now all but extinct. Not that well-educated, worldly, skeptical, and snobbish people have entirely disappeared, only that Raven's own type is no longer to be seen: his was not an earnest agnosticism but a robust eighteenth-century paganism. A civilized man should, he believed, "reject both enthusiasms and faiths, if only because of the ridiculous postures, whether mental or physical, which they require." This philosophy was allied with a deep contempt for the egalitarian moral code of postwar England with its namby-pamby unwillingness to offend. He himself suffered from no such diffidence.

Raven's offensiveness did not grow from bile or melancholy but from extreme high spirits. From earliest youth, he reveled in the role of outrageous provocateur and exuded what one of his school contemporaries, Gerald Priestland, recalled as a "Luciferian aura." "Brilliant when he could be bothered, handsomely copper-headed but with a world-weary slouch and drawl, [he] moved through Charterhouse trailing an odour of brimstone." Noel Annan felt him to be one of the rare "liberators" some of us are lucky enough to encounter during our lives: "Simon was one of those very assured undergraduates who by their example liberate their contemporaries from the shackles of family, school or class."

Raven was the author of thirty-four books (as well as many radio and television plays, essays, and reviews), but his reputation today rests almost entirely on his ten-volume *roman fleuve*, *Alms for Oblivion* (1964–1976). His undertaking has inevitably been compared with Anthony Powell's *Dance to the Music of Time*, also in ten volumes, as it deals with the same social milieu (but a generation younger) and touches on the same themes of time and mutability.

> I wanted to look at the upper-middle-class scene since the war, and in particular my generation's part in it. We had spent our early years as privileged members of a privileged class. How were we faring in the Age of the Common Man? How *ought* we to be faring?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> . . . Would the high-minded lot stoop to conquer? . . . And what about their unscrupulous confreres? No Queensberry rules for them, so they had a flying start. But Fate has a way of bitching things up just when you least expect it.

Many of *Alms for Oblivion*'s protagonists attended the same public school, served in the same regiment (the dashing and aristocratic Earl Hamilton's Light Dragoons), and read Classics or History in a more or less desultory manner at the same Cambridge college (Lancaster, a thinly disguised version of King's). The novels, which, unlike Powell's, jump back and forth in time, take the characters from school (*Fielding Gray*, 1967) to the Army (*Sound the Retreat*, 1971, and *The Sabre Squadron*, 1966), the "corridors of power" (*The Rich Pay Late*, 1964, and *Friends in Low Places*, 1965), scenes of international intrigue (*The Judas Boy*, 1968), student unrest during the Sixties (*Places Where They Sing*, 1970), the movie business and an excursion into American Philistia (*Come Like Shadows*, 1972) and finally to nemesis and impending age (*Bring Forth the Body*, 1974, and *The Survivors*, 1976).

English *romans fleuves* of the last century have tended to be elegiac, for obvious reasons. The horror of World War I, the breakdown of traditional society during the interwar years and its complete reinvention in the postwar period were deeply traumatic to the upper middle class from whose ranks so many serious novelists came. Siegfried Sassoon's and Ford Madox Ford's novel sequences record that trauma with bleak eloquence. *A Dance to the Music of Time*, subtly, and Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour*, rather less subtly, lamented the end of what their authors perceived as a stable social order. Simon Raven tried, intermittently, to be elegiac too, for he bitterly regretted the decay of the ritualistic, male-oriented society in which he grew up and to whose institutions—public school, Army, cricket, university—he was romantically attached.

But Raven was a little too cynical to pull off an affecting elegy. He was the Petronius of his generation, a cold-blooded satirist whose characters were compilations of various appetites and ambitions rather than living beings: if his novels were to be represented graphically, they would perhaps constitute a crude, cartoonish, somewhat pornographic decorative frieze rather than aspiring to the Poussinesque melancholy of Powell's elegant books. And the resemblance to Petronius extends to the personal as well as the literary, with Tacitus's description of the author of the *Satyricon* perfectly applicable to the unregenerate Raven: "By his dissolute life he had become as famous as other men by a life of energy, and he was regarded as no ordinary profligate, but as an accomplished voluptuary. His feckless freedom of speech, being regarded as frankness, procured him popularity."

Simon Raven occasionally wrote about his life, most notably in *Shadows on the Grass* (1981), a memoir which has the dubious distinction of being, in the opinion of E. W. Swanton, "the filthiest book on cricket" ever written. ("Can I quote you on that, Jim?," Raven asked eagerly.) But even more delightful is Michael Barber's *The Captain: The Life and Times of Simon Raven* (1996), a wonderfully hilarious biography which is, rather sadly, better than anything Raven himself ever wrote. But since the persistence of the Raven cult is due more to Raven's personality than to his gifts, which were beguiling but minor, this is acceptable, and Barber more than does his subject justice. His affection for the disreputable writer is obvious, and it is impossible for his reader not to share it, for Raven, for all his vaunted snobbery, intolerance, and amorality, was essentially a sweet man.

Simon Arthur Noel Raven was the grandson of a Victorian industrialist who had made a fortune in the manufacture of socks. His father, Arthur, lived off this fortune and frittered it away over the course of his life until there was very little left for Simon and his two younger siblings. Raven describes his childhood as "middle-class, for

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

which read respectable, prying, puritanical, penny-pinching, joyless."

His intelligence and precocious facility with the classical languages was evident very early, and he won the top scholarship to Charterhouse, where his academic success continued. Raven never ceased to be grateful for his classical education, which imparted not only a tremendous verbal facility, thanks to constant exercises in translation, but a comprehensive and multi-layered worldview. The upper layer, a schoolmaster's version of Hellenism that was propagated in the public schools, Raven described in the following manner in *The Decline of the Gentleman* (1961):

> First, the truth must be sought honestly and with intelligence on every level, and must be prized above convenience and even perhaps above freedom itself, because it is not made by man but exists independently of him. . . . One comes at the truth by logic, patience, and fair-mindedness. From which it follows, by extension, that one should always be *moderate*. . . . With moderation comes tolerance. . . . Being free meant that you were not "*servile*," i.e. . . . that subject to the general good you did not have to do anything against your will and must not, as a point of honour, do anything for monetary gain. . . . Pericles expressed stern views about women: They should be heard of, he said, neither for good nor ill. . . . [T]he Greeks strongly disapproved of inflated pride. . . . They took the view that anyone who became too pleased with himself or thought himself too clever would be punished by the gods with disgrace and ruin.

This simplified and sanitized Hellenism was developed for the purpose of civilizing crass public schoolboys, and designed to harmonize with Christianity: the Greeks were presented as proto-Christians, lacking only the knowledge of Christ to make them perfect. But there were layers beneath layers, and to those with sufficient intellect and curiosity the classical authors also delivered an unsanitized, definitely un- and anti-Christian message, entirely subversive of public school values; Raven sucked this up greedily.

> Here was Horace, openly boasting of how he ran away from a battle. Tacitus, quietly equating enthusiasm with stupidity. Thucydides, grimly announcing that the only law of human affairs was "Necessity." Lucretius, recommending regular one-night stands as a way of securing immunity from passion, which was simply the unwholesome and ridiculous product of suppressed or thwarted lust. Catullus, advocating sex with women or sex with boys, whichever you fancy at the time, because there is no such thing as right or wrong in this context. . . . *All* of them insistent that you take what pleasure you can from this world because only superstitious fools believe in the existence of the next.

Both versions of Hellenism were to mold his character. He remained, from school days on, doggedly pagan, "ready," as he put it, "to back Greek reason against 'revealed truth' any day of the week." In all his novels he honored Greek themes—the irresistible forces of Retribution and Necessity are often given a central position, and he did not underestimate the power of the Furies—and understood that the gods must be placated; but he had little use for God the Father or His putative son: "Christ asked for everything he got," remarks Captain Detterling, one of the many characters in *Alms for Oblivion* who tend to serve as mouthpieces for the author's own thoughts. The best Raven was ever to say of Christianity was that Anglicanism at any rate is "a quiet and decent superstition, as they go, offering a wide choice in decoration and no poisonous enthusiasms."

Raven was a brilliant schoolboy but in no way a model one, for he took the advice of Lucretius and Catullus rather more literally than his masters would have liked. Sexually, he had catholic tastes, no inhibitions whatever, and scant respect for the moral code imposed by the school. He made countless conquests among the other boys and en-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

joyed "a number of experiences," as he later boasted, "far more erotic (and poetic) than the perfunctory grabbing and snatching and jerking depicted on Greek vases." Raven's school adventures are depicted in *Fielding Gray*, the most autobiographical novel in *Alms for Oblivion*, but X-rated as the novel is, the reality seems to have been even more so. In the end even the tolerance of Charterhouse's long-suffering headmaster was exhausted, and Raven, although he had won his First XI Cricket colors and a scholarship to King's, was expelled.

For a few weeks, he said, he felt "like Adam and Eve did when they had to do a proper day's work." Like his alter-ego Fielding Gray, he had hoped and expected to become "a wining and dining don. A witty, worldly, *comfortable* don." Would Cambridge still have him? He was now to learn one of the most important lessons of his life: "I got a commission, joined clubs and took up my place at King's as if nothing had happened. People just giggled when they learnt I'd been sacked for 'the usual thing.' . . . One trembled in fear of the last trump and all that sounded was a wet fart."

With his compulsory term of military service impending, Raven joined the Parachute Regiment and was soon shipped to Bangalore as an Officer Cadet. In this capacity Raven set the pattern for his later behavior as an officer in the Regular Army: "He had this romantic, Edwardian view of what being a subaltern entailed," said Raven's Charterhouse and Army friend James Prior (later Lord Prior, longtime Cabinet Minister under Margaret Thatcher and the model for *Alms for Oblivion*'s opportunistic Peter Morrison). "It was vital to look the part—carry a swagger stick and wear kid gloves. . . . You were there to lead your platoon over the top in the event of a fight. Otherwise, it was a case of 'Carry on, sergeant.'"

But it was 1947 and the Raj was winding up its business in undignified haste; "One got a crash course in the sudden fall of Imperial greatness," Raven remarked. It was a richly symbolic historical moment at which Raven was given a ringside seat, and the novel it produced, *Sound the Retreat*, is the finest volume of *Alms for Oblivion*: full of irony, compassion (a rare quality in Raven's work), and featuring the strongest and most memorable character in the sequence, the colorful Muslim officer Gilzai Khan.

Raven duly took his place at King's in 1948. The post-war climate was anti-elitist and leveling, rife with progressive dogma, and King's was particularly "pink" in shade; one might have thought that Raven, with his rapidly hardening conservative attitudes, would have rebelled. Yet as he acknowledged, the college's very pinkness presented distinct advantages to himself: "Nobody minded what you did in bed or what you said about God, a very civilized attitude in 1948."

Raven was undiscriminating in his sexual tastes, and Cambridge offered these more scope than Charterhouse had done: one disgruntled Newnham girl was overheard saying, "I'm not going to bed with Simon ever again. One day it's Boris, then a choral scholar, then it's me, then it's back to Boris again. No!" Raven was a promiscuous bisexual who on balance favored boys and young men over women. Nevertheless, he managed to knock up a recent graduate, Susan Kilner.

This was a potential disaster, for he prized his independence above everything else. (Two of his early novels, *Doctors Wear Scarlet* [1960] and *Close of Play* [1962], feature characters who take this desperate need for personal independence to violent extremes.) So, as Raven remembers it, "I said, 'Right ho, I'll marry you. That'll keep your family happy. But I won't live with you—ever.' Very caddish of me, I agree. But I knew, you see, that if ever there were a born bachelor, it was me. And Susan accepted this. She was a brick." Although he kept in touch with Susan and their son, Adam, for the rest of his life, and would eventually foot the bill for Adam's education, they did not seriously impinge on his resolutely single life.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At the end of his undergraduate career Raven was awarded the Studentship (that is, graduate fellowship) he coveted. But extended scholarly endeavor turned out, perhaps not surprisingly, to go against his nature. "Scholarship was one thing, drudgery another. I very soon concluded that nothing would induce me to read, let alone make notes on, hundreds and hundreds of *very, very, very* boring books."

How then to make a living? Raven was by now earning a small income reviewing books for the *Listener*, under the aegis of the legendary J. R. Ackerley, but his first novel had been rejected, business ("money-grubbing") was beyond the social Pale, and schoolmastering was impossible, "because I was on every blacklist in existence." He ended up joining the Regular Army with backdated seniority, attaching himself to the smart King's Own Shropshire Light Infantry.

Raven spent three years in the Army, serving in Germany (his experiences there would go into *The Sabre Squadron*) and in Kenya against the Mau Mau (a conflict which, fictionalized, became the backdrop for his first novel, *The Feathers of Death* [1959]). He looked at the British Army, even in its decline, in a highly romantic light: "although there was more in him of Alcibiades than Achilles," comments Barber, "he retained a sentimental attachment to the Homeric ideal."

It became rapidly apparent that he was far too lazy to make a decent field commander. "I loved the Army as an institution and loathed every single thing it required me to do," he later said. A brother-officer remembers that "Captain Raven settled down to organize his life, believing that ability to delegate authority was the true mark of a leader of men. He speedily delegated 100% of his." His most significant achievements were to effect an improvement in the food, and to set up "a rough and ready knocking shop" for the men. A middle-class man trying to lead an upper-class life, he ran up massive debts and had to leave the Army hurriedly: he would later recreate his ejection from the cozy Regiment into a cold world in his 1959 novel *Brother Cain*.

"And so, at the age of thirty," Raven wrote in *The Decline of the Gentleman* (1961), "I had successively disgraced myself with three fine institutions, each of which had made me free of its full and rich resources, had trained me with skill and patience, and had shown me nothing but forbearance and charity when I failed in trust." He now fell back on his last resource: writing. "For in a literary career there was one unfailing advantage: No degree whatever of moral or social disgrace could disqualify one from practice—and indeed a bad character, if suitably tricked out for presentation, might win one helpful publicity."

He embarked on a rackety, hand-to-mouth Grub Street life, described fairly faithfully in the early career of Tom Llewellyn, the unwashed intellectual in *Alms for Oblivion*. He enjoyed some success, but his weakness for gambling, drinking, and overeating quickly took control of his life, and physical deterioration followed apace. J. R. Ackerley provides a memorable portrait of the prematurely aging Raven:

> A disaster has happened to him, I fear [Ackerley informed E. M. Forster]; he has got plump. His one-time crowning glory, that abundant Titian hair, crinkles thinly and gingerly now above a fat pink face, with creases of fat about the eyes. . . . Suede boots, and a loose, short, shapeless, not very clean camel-hair coat—or would it be called duffle? He looked like the kind of person who asks for a light in the Long Bar of the Trocadero and to whom one replies with only a regretful mutter as one edges away. . . . He has his intelligence still, and indeed his charm and warmth of manner, but I did not accompany him to his homosexual club.

Raven seemed set on a course of complete self-destruction, but salvation now appeared in the guise of his publisher, Anthony Blond. "This is the last hand-out you get," Blond told him. "Leave London, or leave my employ." Blond offered his feckless client

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

generous terms: if he would move at least fifty miles from London, Blond would pay him a steady £15 and settle the following bills: dentist, tailor, nightly dinner at a restaurant and, within reason, wine merchant. Raven obeyed without a moment's argument, moving to Deal, in Kent, where his brother Myles was teaching at a preparatory school. He was, to his own surprise, immediately happy.

The removal from London revealed a surprising side to Raven's character: the steady worker. The rake who lived for pleasure disappeared and was replaced by a worker bee of extremely regular habits. He would write all morning, read in the afternoons, dine at a nearby hotel and spend the evening at the local pub with Myles and his schoolmaster friends. Under this regimen he produced a huge quantity of work.

His motto was "Art for art's sake, money for God's sake," and not all of his large output was of the highest quality. He took on the daunting task of producing a second *roman fleuve* for instance, *The First-Born of Egypt*, only for financial reasons. It was a continuation, of sorts, of *Alms for Oblivion*, but Raven had long since run out of ideas and material and was excruciatingly bored during the writing process ("How can I go on with this?" he frequently asked himself. "Please God, let me win a football pool"); the boredom shows, badly, in the final product. But somewhere along the way Raven had acquired a professional attitude, and his television plays, notably the BBC adaptation of Trollope's *Palliser* novels and other adaptations of books by Iris Murdoch, Nancy Mitford, and Aldous Huxley, were very fine indeed. He possessed in fact a natural gift for adaptation, a technical skill he likened to translating in and out of Latin.

In middle age he preferred, by his own admission, "a good dinner to a good fuck." When in funds he enjoyed treating his friends to expensive meals, paying the bill with a flourish: when out of them he never economized *too* radically. A friend remembers him, in dire straits, saying "Well, dear, I'm going to be hellish mean. I'm not going to take anyone out to dinner." "What about you?" said the friend. "Are you going to go on taking yourself out to dinner?" "Oh yes, dear, I'm not going to be *miserly*."

Raven spent his last years in Sutton's Hospital, an alms house for impoverished old gentlemen, long connected with Charterhouse, which gave precedence to "decrepit or old Captaynes either at Sea or Land" and "Souldiers maymed or ympotent." It was hard to get a place there, and although at this point Raven was certainly "ympotent" he was neither decrepit nor maimed. But he managed to talk his way in, and so ended his days contentedly enough, in yet another all-male club.

Although he readily and even happily admitted to being no gentleman, Raven revered the gentleman as an ideal and mourned his passing, for the modern age, he believed, had rejected the gentleman and everything he represented. "Gentlemen can now only behave as such, or be tolerated as such, in circumstances that are manifestly contrived or unreal," he asserted in *The Decline of the Gentleman*: in anachronistically hierarchical institutions, that is, like the military.

He illustrates this contention in the career of Peter Morrison, one of the protagonists of *Alms for Oblivion*. Morrison has all the trappings of the gentleman, certainly. The eldest son of an old East Anglia family, Morrison inherits substantial estates, distinguishes himself in the Indian Army at the time of Independence, enjoys a happy and monogamous marriage, and serves for many years as a Conservative M.P., eventually becoming Minister of Commerce. Yet he is subtly, without even knowing it himself, a hypocrite and an opportunist, and always manages to further his own interests while leaving his "honour"—a flexible term in his case, as in most of ours—intact. "Oh, he likes to do the right thing," observes Detterling; "to be seen to do the right thing, and even to believe it himself, if he possibly can. But he's got a lot of shit in his tanks."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Morrison's antipode is the Machiavellian journalist and politician Somerset Lloyd-James (thought by many readers to resemble Raven's former schoolfellow Lord Rees-Mogg). Lloyd-James also comes from a "good" family and has received a gentleman's education, but unlike Morrison he feels no obligation to uphold the gentleman's creed: he is openly unscrupulous and grasping, relishing the brute struggle for power and influence. A practicing Catholic, he habitually resorts to Jesuitical casuistry in dubious justification of whatever shady deal he might have in mind at the moment.

In their early thirties, the two men compete for the Conservative candidacy for the Parliamentary seat of Bishop's Cross. Morrison is in every way the superior candidate—*apparently*: three years previously, during the Suez crisis, he had resigned from Parliament because, while he disapproved of the government's actions, he didn't want to show a lack of support for the Army, to which he remained loyal: it was a complicated matter of personal conscience, in other words, surely commendable, showing rare delicacy in a politician. But while Morrison congratulates himself, others can see behind the façade of high principle. Fielding Gray castigates Morrison as "a pompous, self-satisfied prig. All this prate about duty and honour and loyalty, and not a row of beans to show for it." Sir Edwin Turbot, a Whitehall power-broker, opines that "Lloyd-James is pretty foul, I grant you that. But he does things. He doesn't sit around moaning about his honour." And the political grandee Lord Canteloupe, one of Raven's finest and most robust creations, frankly prefers working with a "howling shit" like Lloyd-James: "For the great thing about shits," he reflects, "was that they got on with it (provided the price was right) and didn't ask damn silly questions."

Idealism and realism are at war throughout *Alms for Oblivion*, with Raven reserving all the heavy artillery for use against idealism. ("Idealists are far more dangerous than criminals," says the mathematician Daniel Mond, the only character in *Alms for Oblivion* who can be said to represent the Good. "Criminals stop when they've got what they wanted. Idealists never stop because they can never attain their ideal.") Lord Canteloupe, the personification of appetite and greed, is the series's great realist, for better and for worse. He makes his first appearance in *Friends in Low Places*: having turned the grounds of his Stately Home into a profitable theme park, in the manner of the Duke of Bedford, he receives an offer to advise the government on a project for morally uplifting public entertainment. His ideas on the subject are worth quoting:

> "Now what about this? Government-sponsored caravan sites for holidays. Make a filthy mess of some well-known beauty spot—they'll love that—and then publish a lot of balls about The People enjoying its Rights in the Countryside, that kind of blab. Jam the bloody caravans as close together as possible—you know how they love being crowded—make a song and dance about being good neighbours, give a prize for the best behaved family, and perhaps throw in compulsory P.T."

Lord Canteloupe is manifestly *not* a gentleman: he is an aristocrat, a class for which Raven shows little mercy. "Whereas the gentleman always seeks to deserve his position," Raven observed, "the aristocrat, disdainful and insouciant, is quite happy just to exploit it." A rare (and refreshing) bird among conservative English authors of the last century, Raven displayed no romantic nostalgia for an aristocracy in picturesque decline.

Alms for Oblivion contains quite a number of selfish aristocrats, like Canteloupe, and pseudo-gentlemen, like Morrison: what it does *not* contain are very many *real* gentlemen. In fact these are so thin on the ground that one is tempted to wonder whether in Raven's scheme of things the genuine article actually exists, or is, instead, merely an intellectual abstraction. A few characters fit the bill in the moral depart-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

ment, but none of them, significantly, is an *English* gentleman in the traditional sense: Daniel Mond, a Jew; the Muslim Gilzai Khan; Tom Llewellyn, of lowly Welsh origins; Piero, a teenaged Italian prostitute. Fielding Gray, who claims to live by the code of officer and gentleman, is far too tainted a character to qualify as the latter.

Raven's *Weltanschauung*—what one friend called his "Regency, cynical, materialistic outlook"—made for some fine comedy, but its limitations became evident when something more was called for, real emotion or strength. He always maintained that his classical education had inoculated him against love. He was probably right, but the resulting immunity did not always work to his advantage. The lack of love harms his writing: all his books share a tiresome coarseness and a tendency to sentiment. No one in all the enormous cast of *Alms for Oblivion* is the least bit emotionally affecting, except for the gallant and witty Gilzai Khan. As for the female characters, they are all of one type, the slavering nymphomaniac: Raven's was a man's world, and he could see women only as unwelcome intruders.

At one point in the sequence Raven has Fielding Gray articulate his professional creed.

> "I never said I was an artist. I am an entertainer. . . . I arrange words in pleasing patterns in order to make money. I try to give good value—to see that my patterns are well wrought—but I do not delude myself by inflating the nature of my function. I try to be neat, intelligent and lucid: let others be 'creative' or 'inspired.'"

Is this how Raven saw his own writerly task? For the philosophy is spurious, of course: entertainers, if they are any good, must also be artists, and a lack of creativity or inspiration is just as fatal to their results as it would be to a more artistic (*un*entertaining?) writer. Raven too often makes the reader feel that he is simply setting up some formal and hypothetical situation and then inserting his characters into it.

Michael Barber compared Raven's work with a ball at Versailles: "all that pomp and glitter and finery while the chamber pots overflow in every corner." Raven's fascination with smut for its own sake is undoubtedly entertaining, but in the end it contributed to the work's one-dimensionality. His friend Christopher Moorson thought the novels were like a weird combination of Henty and Huysmans. "Reading these," he observed to Anthony Blond, "is like eating your way through a cake which is made of chestnuts, and covered with layers of cream and treacle." To which Blond replied: "Yes, *and* covered with shit, my dear."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The place of poetry

by David Yezzi

My grandfather was a self-made man, a child of immigrants, and a dandy. In later life, he lined his closets with neckties and waistcoats, with bowler hats and two-toned bucks. He enjoyed cutting a figure, as they say, and fancied himself a public man, an entrepreneur, a man of influence. I can remember rooting around in his study as a boy and discovering numerous books on public speaking, filled with apothegms and off-color jokes meant to tickle an audience or frame an argument. I'm not sure how often he was called upon to ascend a dais, but he was well prepared for the occasion.

As his collection of toast-master chrestomathies attests, he understood the power of quotation: that, when addressing a crowd, one may be bolstered by the sayings of others, of a writer or thinker, for instance, whose words capture a truth that can then launch an argument or anecdote of one's own. A sly convention, it deflects judgment from the speaker until he's had a chance to clear his throat. I suspect *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* was my grandfather's bible at such times, and his oxblood copy is still on my parents' shelves.

Greater speakers than he have relied on this profitable technique, routinely used by orator, pundit, essayist, and poet. Montaigne, for instance, must have had a glorious Latin edition of *Bartlett's* at his disposal. For poets, the use of epigraphs works a similar magic, as when Coleridge floats lines from the "Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence" above his "Dejection: An Ode," forecasting the turbulent tone of his poem with the ballad's promise of "a deadly storm." Skim a magazine or newspaper and one finds the practice in excellent health in the news media, as well, and politicians, in their turn, routinely poach on the felicitous formulations of others to add heft to their utterances.

Among the stores of the much-quoted, poetry makes a particularly juicy addition to any speech or swath of journalistic prose. Due to limitations of space, however, poems rarely appear entire or even in excerpts of more than a few lines. The ideal poetic mot, from a journalist's or speaker's point of view, can be delivered in one line. Writers necessarily co-opt such bright squibs out of context and with varying degrees of fidelity to the original. Often they have their own ends in mind, which augers poorly for the poem quoted.

"They also serve who only stand and wait" exemplifies the sort of multipurpose truism regularly misappropriated by sages of the podium and page. Never mind that it is Milton wrestling with the fact of his blindness ("When I consider how my light is spent"), that the argument of the poem is theological, or that the master being served is his "Maker." Endlessly misapplied, the motto has come to refer most often to service to the state, so much so that one enterprising company now engraves the line on gold heart-shaped pendants for ser-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

vicemen to give as gifts to their wives back home. Violence of this kind by *Bartlett's* abusers goes largely unlamented, as if poems were measured by the multiplicity of uses to which we can put them.

Then there is Blake's prefatory poem to his long work *Milton*, immediately recognizable in its musical setting by Sir Charles Hubert Hastings Parry: "And did the Countenance Divine/ Shine forth upon our clouded hills?," etc. As F. W. Bateson has noted:

> Blake's poem is now a popular hymn and is in process of becoming a sort of unofficial national anthem. No doubt it owes its popularity primarily to Parry's vigorous setting but the adoption by Churches and women's organizations of this anti-clerical paean of free love is amusing evidence of the carelessness with which poetry is read today.

Bateson's mockery of the slipshod appropriation of poems appeared in his *English Poetry: A Critical Introduction* of 1950, and the carelessness he describes continues to run rampant.

Consider, as another example—this from the political sphere—the Kennedy brothers' fondness for Tennyson's "Ulysses," quoted first by John F. and Robert and later by Edward in his speech to the Democratic National Convention in 1980. At the close of Tennyson's masterly monologue, Ulysses, safely home in Ithaca, envisions one last uncertain voyage:

> Push off, and sitting well in order smite
> The sounding furrows; for my purpose holds
> To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths
> Of all the western stars, until I die.
> It may be that the gulfs will wash us down;
> It may be we shall touch the Happy Isles,
> And see the great Achilles, whom we knew.
> Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
> We are not now that strength which in old days
> Moved earth and heaven, that which we are,
> we are,
> One equal temper of heroic hearts,
> Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Poetry dragooned into public service frequently rebels, treating those who handle it roughly with equal brutality, and "Ulysses" has had the last laugh (or sigh) in this case, as well. Did no one on Senator Kennedy's staff think to mention that Dante's Ulysses, whom Tennyson's closely resembles, sails off to his death, or that the soaring last line is not an unalloyed affirmation but, at best, a deeply qualified and melancholy one? A forgivable oversight, I suppose, but could not the Senator himself discern the poem's dramatic irony or the undertow of despair and resignation tugging at the voice in its hoping against hope? Perhaps he could, and that is why his version of the poem, as it was spoken at the convention in 1980, ran as follows:

> I am a part of all that I have met
> Tho much is taken, much abides
> That which we are, we are—
> One equal temper of heroic hearts
> strong in will
> To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Cobbling together the expansive sentiments while dispensing with the dolorous ones in this way not only turns the meaning to mush but also pulverizes the verse to prose—and this from someone who professes to love Tennyson. In the end, the emotional complexity of the poem resists the rallying cry.

Selective sloganeering of this kind regularly strays so far from the intent of the poet that the excerpt takes on not only a different meaning but also a completely different life. Such is the fate of Horace's "ut pictura poesis," which in *Ars Poetica* suggests a similarity between painting and poetry. To set the line in context, here are a few verses from Ben Jonson's translation:

> As painting, so is poesy. Some man's hand
> Will take you more, the nearer that you stand;
> As some the farther off: this loves the dark;
> This fearing not the subtlest judge's mark,
> Will in the light be viewed: this, once the sight
> Doth please: this, ten times over will delight.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Horace's general comparison, which has little to say about the actual methods shared by the two art forms, points up the *differences* between them at least as much as it succeeds in allying them. In common usage, however, the phrase has taken on a blanket meaning, painting = poetry, despite the fact that Horace suggests nothing of the sort. A poem reduced to catchphrases flaunts its apothegmatic ornaments but goes afoul of itself when the whole poem wishes to have its say.

Preeminent in the rogues' gallery of *Bartlett's* abusers, the media make particularly inhospitable hosts for poetry. This is not to suggest that poetry isn't frequently in the news; lately it has received an inordinate amount of attention from the press, and mostly for the wrong reasons. Beginning with reports of the public's resurgent interest in verse following the attacks on the United States in 2001, poetry has provided fodder for newspaper headlines with the profligacy of a Hollywood murder scandal. Readers receive the stories from week to week: Ruth Lilly's gift of $100 million to the Chicago-based *Poetry* magazine; Amiri Baraka's laureateship of the state of New Jersey torpedoed by his own incendiary verse; Tom Paulin's invitation, then apparent disinvitation and subsequent reinvitation, to speak at Harvard; Laura Bush's cancellation of her "Poetry and the American Voice" event due to a threatened protest by participating poets; and, finally, the Poets Against the War gatherings across the country staged to defuse impending war with Iraq.

Descending from the high ground of providing solace and occasioning introspection after September 11, poetry has slipped into fens of controversy and polemic over the last year and a half. Following the terrorist attacks, reports in *The New York Times* and elsewhere offered up poetry as the art form best suited in times of public crisis to address our deepest feelings of fear and loss. That countless people turned to poetry cannot not be denied. What the media chose to quote in the aftermath of September 11, however, in particular some half-understood lines by W. H. Auden from a poem he ultimately renounced as "infected with an incurable dishonesty," fails to shed light on poetry's particular power to foster contemplation at such times.

As Peter Steinfels argued in *The New York Times* in December 2001, "there is a new demand [since September 11] that ideas and language, especially about war and peace but also about religion and moral obligation, be precise and explicit." This is just what poems, including Auden's "September 1, 1939," are not. Great poems provide solace of a particularly complex kind, offering the considerable balm afforded by the appreciation of a beautiful object and of the moral measuring of language. This begs the question of whether or not poetry is well suited to argue the specifics of a particular political crisis. Poems encompass nuances of tone and language that make them particularly incompliant pieces of writing, especially regarding those sureties demanded of them in recent days. Political rhetoric, by contrast, tends to simplify language and argument in order to persuade or to incite a desired action.

"Poetry is what gets lost in translation," Robert Frost suggested. Rendering a poem —which is a work of linguistic subtlety that pays special attention to music, rhythm, diction, figurative speech, and the connotative power of words—in another language is to reconstruct the mosaics of the Basilica San Marco using tesserae of other sizes and hues. Certain recognizable shapes of the original may emerge, but the glory of the whole will be travestied. The very problem that Frost discerned when moving from language to language applies when moving from one *kind* of language to another. To extend Frost's formulation, it could be said that poetry is what gets lost in polemic. The poet and the political advocate have much in common and nothing in common. Both may use for effect the same rhetorical strategies of exordium, narratio, confirmatio, etc. Both may incorporate metaphor,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

parallelism, personification, hyperbole, and so on. Yet the language of poetry mingles uneasily with the language of politics. The poet and the polemicist have different jobs and venture onto each other's territory at risk to their separate projects.

As the great and cussedly idiosyncratic poet-critic Yvor Winters has explained, the work of the poet is to render in language a human experience, taking great care to match the connotative or emotional charge of the language used to the motivating impulse of the poem. In other words, a poet's unique responsibility is to the moral management of the emotional content of language with regard to a human experience. If the poet errs in either direction—toward excessive or unmotivated emotion or toward the aridly journalistic—he or she quickly arrives at sentimentality or bathos.

Winters reminds us that language carries weight beyond its literal, denotative meaning, each word containing an affective charge produced by the connotative penumbra surrounding it. When a poet deploys words in a poem, he must be in control of the associative power of language in order to convey reasonably and responsibly the essence of his subject. He does this in a very particular way that prose writers cannot manage as precisely. "Writing, as it approaches the looseness of prose and departs from the strictness of verse," Winters explains, "tends to lose the capacity for fluid and highly complex relationships between words; language, in short, reapproaches its original stiffness and generality." Political discourse can be sly, subtle, filled with emotion and figurative language, but it lags behind poems in the aesthetic attention paid to the interrelation of words and to the fine-tuned calibrations of emotion they embody.

A poem's language, the degree of truth it achieves in describing experience, and the greatness of its subject matter constitute its bid for universality. Difficulties arise as soon as poets begin to use poems to address a specific political viewpoint as opposed to the larger question of human experience, every political situation generally having multiple viewpoints. Political didacticism in poetry runs the risk of seriously limiting a poem's relevance outside of the finite context of a given issue or debate. The rhetoric of political persuasion lacks universality by definition. As the poet Eavan Boland has said, once a poem is made to speak for a particular constituency it is diminished.

Certainly, there have been great poems that have addressed political concerns; in fact, many of the greatest poems in the Western tradition deal with politics. *The Divine Comedy* and the plays of Euripides are just two examples. Then there are Milton and Blake, whom I've already mentioned, as well as the poets of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century, with their coded political critiques. In order to fully appreciate these works today, it is necessary to bone up on our history, which is fair enough: from Dante's Whites and Blacks to the government of ancient Athens, and from the English Civil War to the reign of George III to recent European history. Finally, though, the political context of these works is for contemporary readers a kind of background music to the spiritual and human dramas enacted in them and to their textures as works of art. Without their signal aesthetic qualities, they would be read by weedy doctoral candidates and by few others.

Perhaps, Euripides' greatest political victory came after his death. As Plutarch tells us, the poetry of Euripides saved Athens from destruction following Sparta's conquest of the city at the end of the Peloponnesian War. A call went out from certain quarters to have the city razed, and

> Erianthus, the Theban, gave his vote to pull down the city, and turn the country into sheep-pasture; yet afterwards, when there was a meeting of the captains together, a man of Phocis, singing the first chorus in Euripides's Electra, which begins "Electra, Agamemnon's child, I come/ Unto thy desert home," they

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

> were all melted with compassion, and it seemed to be a cruel deed to destroy and pull down a city which had been so famous, and produced such men.

There is nothing overtly didactic or political, no humanitarian plea, in the passage in question. If Plutarch has gotten it right, it was Euripides' poetry itself that saved the city, through the force of its remarkable beauty. Furthermore, the strange efficacy of the passage as a political tool has little to do with why it remains in print today.

Regarding Euripides' descendants—those composers in verse of contemporary criticisms of the state—a spate of Op-Ed columns and reported pieces told the story of the rebellious throng of poets who collected antiwar poems by e-mail and threatened to turn Laura Bush's literary tea party into a publicity stunt. When Mrs. Bush cancelled the event, poets protested not being allowed to protest by staging events around the country, as peace poems piled up on the Internet by the thousands.

It is every poet's right and responsibility to participate in the political process, just as it is the right and responsibility of every citizen. It is perhaps not surprising that, moved to participate in public discourse, a poet would want to call upon the eloquence and affective powers of poetry to both make a statement and to draw attention to that statement. But do poets, by their very vocation, possess a certain moral authority or a higher degree of insight when it comes to questions of state? Given that their medium is language, and language is the basis of political discourse, perhaps they are better suited than, say, painters in that regard. But from where does their unique moral authority derive?

A poet's moral authority, essential to the well-being of culture, derives from the truth contained in his or her poems. Achieving this truth is no mean feat; on the contrary, it is one of the crowning achievements of humankind. To subjoin this project to the furtherance of a political end is, on the one hand, no great matter. Politics is part of our experience and may be described as such. But if a poem produced by a specific political struggle lasts it is because it has outlived that struggle, as well as whatever power it may have had to incite action in that struggle. What remains is its power to affect the reader through the beauty of its language and what Winters called its moral content, which lives in the handling of that language.

How does the poem's moral content relate to human action? Winters explains:

> In the situations of daily life, one does not write a poem before acting: one makes a more rapid and simple judgment. But if the poem does not lead to a particular act, it does not prevent action. It gives us a better way of judging representative acts than we should otherwise have. It is thus a civilizing influence: it trains our power of judgment, and should, I imagine, affect the quality of daily judgments and actions.

In other words, poetry does not instruct the reader to act in a prescribed way; it is not a spur to a particular action but a tempering force that better equips us to judge our actions whatever the situation. It cannot tell us the right thing to do; rather, it seasons us to make those decisions for ourselves.

It would be impossible to suggest through quotation the effect that reading poems can have on our moral sensibility, but perhaps the conclusion of George Herbert's "Church Monuments" (which Winters prized) partially suggests it through metaphor:

> Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem
> And true descent, that when thou shalt grow fat
>
> And wanton in thy cravings, thou mayst know
> That flesh is but the glass which holds the dust
> That measures all our time; which also shall
> Be crumbled into dust. Mark here below
> How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,
> That thou mayst fit thyself against thy fall.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Shadow language

by Eric Ormsby

Of all the theses advanced to explain the incomparable abundance of Shakespeare's language, perhaps the most audacious—and certainly the wackiest—is that propounded some forty years ago by an Iraqi professor at the University of Baghdad. In a massive tome, the professor argued that the lone survivor of the shipwreck of an Arab merchant vessel washed up on the shores of Elizabethan England and made his way, wet, bedraggled, and famished, to the nearest village where he found hospitality and shelter. Establishing himself, there our mariner quickly mastered English and in short order was churning out remarkable poems and dramas. Relocated to Stratford-on-Avon and London, he rose to prominence in the theater, even winning the favor of the Virgin Queen. His original name had been Shaykh Zubayr, but (though there is no letter p in the Arabic alphabet) this was soon anglicized to Shakespeare.

This thesis, which would have delighted Jorge Luis Borges, rested not merely on fanciful historical supposition but on a mad, meticulous, and painstaking inventory of Shakespeare's vocabulary. The Iraqi argued, with the unassailable logic of the truly demented, that most of Shakespeare's language could be traced back to Classical Arabic. How else explain the unparalleled richness of the texts? By the fourteenth century, after all, Arabic could boast a colossal lexicon; one dictionary alone—the renowned *Lisān al-'arab* or "The Language of the Arabs" by Ibn Manzūr—required some twenty densely printed volumes (the size of the current OED) to encompass its lexical profusion, and this was compiled almost two centuries before Shaykh Zubayr's adventitious landing. Even more telling, our scholar detected scores, even hundreds, of borrowings and "cognates" in the Bard's works. To give but one example: the Arabic adjective *nabīl*, which means "noble," occurs, naturally enough, throughout the plays and poems. Other such (false) cognates swarmed the Folios and clinched the case for our researcher.

This may not be the craziest treatise on Shakespeare, but it certainly comes close. And yet, consideration of it prompts an interesting question. Is there such a phenomenon in poetry as a "shadow language," that is, a concealed or tacit foreign language which exerts a strong and sometimes fruitful pressure on the native tongue of a poet? In one sense, of course, the answer is an obvious yes. Much of traditional English poetry would have been the poorer without the pressure of, say, Latin or French. Chaucer and Milton are unimaginable without such linguistic shadowing. When Chaucer writes in "The Knight's Tale" that

> Infinite been the sorwes and the teeres
> Of olde folk, and folk of tendre yeeres,

the pathos of the lines is enhanced by the interplay between the Latinate "infinite"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

and "tendre" and the plain English of "olde folk" and "teeres." Or when Milton, in "Lycidas," says,

> Were it not better done as others use,
> To sport with Amaryllis in the shade,
> Or with the tangles of Neæra's hair?

we are enchanted by the brazen but delicate juxtaposition of "sport" and "Amaryllis," "tangles" and the alien "Neæra." These are of course standard devices in English poetry even in our own day (witness Eliot's "Inexplicable splendour of Ionian white and gold," among many possible examples). Chaucer's deep familiarity with French, Milton's knowledge of Latin, Greek, Italian, and Hebrew, expanded the realm of aural opportunity available to them as poets. Their practice moreover was instinctual, not deliberate, and the effect was to nuance and complicate the sound-patterns of their verse in ways that nowadays seem virtually lost to most poets.

Foreign words or phrases may be introduced quite consciously as well, often to witty effect, as when the contemporary English poet John Fuller concludes one of the sonnets in his verse-novel *The Illusionist* with the lines:

> Lead me back gently from the brink!
> Restore me, and restore my drink!
> Restore the power of suggestion,
> Yield me the grandeur of your sex:
> *De minimis non curat lex*!

Foreign words may lurk as aural shadows just below the boundaries of our common speech. Joyce (to cite a prose master) does this with Arabic in an early passage of *Finnegans Wake*:

> Our cubehouse still rocks as earwitness to the thunder of his arafatas but we hear also through successive ages that shabby choruysh of unkalified muzzlenimiissilehims that blackguardise the whitestone ever hurtleturtled out of heaven. Stay us wherefore in our search for tightcousness, O Sustainer, what time we rise and when we take up to toothmick and before we lump down upown our leatherbed and in the night and at the fading of the stars! For a nod to the nabir is better than wink to the wabsanti.

Allusions to the Ka'ba with its sacred black stone, the Plain of 'Arafat where Muslim pilgrims congregate, the Prophet's own tribe of the Quraysh, the caliphs, among many other punning references, would not have endeared Joyce to our dour and dogged Iraqi. But this form of pastiche, for all its genius, is not quite the effect I wish to define. In Joyce we are always conscious of the artifice, and the humor arises from this awareness. I have in mind something at once subtler and more organic; a kind of lexical and syntactic impingement that gives a new texture and color to the surface of verse.

When I first began writing poetry I found myself seeking out this elusive quality in the work of others. Certainly I found it in Shakespeare and Milton and Tennyson and Eliot, but it was rarely discernible in the verse most contemporary poets were writing, whether they subscribed to the Beat "aesthetic" or to more formal codes (Robert Lowell and Richard Wilbur struck me then, and still do, as the great exceptions). Why did most American poetry after Crane and Moore and Stevens seem so thin and monotone compared to, say, Baudelaire or Virgil, whom I was also reading at that time in the originals? When I read a poem new to me, I always looked at once for the feel and texture of the language, even though it may have been the subject matter that first drew me. If the poem was uninteresting to my mouth, I stopped reading it; that is, if it did not in some way seduce me into saying it, into forming and re-forming its particular aural configuration, I immediately lost interest in it. I was looking for lines like Milton's wonderful:

> their lean and flashy songs
> grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw.

That was undiluted pleasure for the ear, not only because of the infinitely interesting col-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

location of syllables, but because of its perfect aptness for its subject. But where in most American poetry of the 1960s would I find anything like that, or like Baudelaire's "Les morts, les pauvres morts, ont de grandes douleurs," with its plangently modulated vowels? Even then I knew that the imitation of such effects could lead to comical grotesqueries, but I continued to be intrigued by the narrowness of the American vocalic palette and the, as it seemed to me then, incomparably richer and wider aural possibilities offered by others. When I began to study other languages, not only French and Latin, but Greek and Italian and German, I was still further stimulated by the contrast between my own meager resources and those available to speakers of other tongues. In those days, mostly during the Sixties and Seventies, it seems to me that I drenched myself in as many strange, alien, and outright exotic vernaculars as I could, not only Hebrew, modern as well as biblical, but Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Syriac. Some of these, such as Arabic, I ended up learning well; in others I merely dabbled. But with all of them it was the poetry in its original language that fascinated and, indeed, obsessed me.

During this period I laid my hands on an old Folkways recording entitled *The Sound of World Poetry* which contained recitations of classical poems in a dozen different languages, including Chinese. Without understanding a single word, I played this LP again and again, sometimes memorizing the Russian or Tagalog or Bengali stanzas by the sheer force of repetition. The strange rhythms, the intricate prosodies, the pitches and tones, the wealth of rhyme, all held me spellbound. A curious gluttony of the ear kept me rapt to those incomprehensible but shapely patternings. To this day I do not mind, in fact, I enjoy, hearing poetry in languages I do not know and will never learn. This may sound impractical and even pointless, but I continue to believe that it helps a poet to expand the limits of his or her aural universe and that the best way to do this is by a kind of precise but trancelike attentiveness to the entire panoply of verbal music the human mouth is capable of uttering. Certainly I had no intention of smuggling Kirgiz or Malayalam accents into my own poetry; it was the fascination of the sounds that mesmerized my ear. Nevertheless, this relentless exposure to other vocalic realms, this palatal globe-trotting, did, I think, eventually work an influence on my own writing, though not always a benign one. (I've never sought confirmation of this practice, but I was pleased to find it in the superb English poet James Fenton's recent book *An Introduction to English Poetry* where he writes, using the example of listening to songs in languages we don't understand: "Genuine language, even when we do not know what it means, sounds different from cod language, real words from nonsense words.")

A poem, I thought, is a physical object, as tactile as a statue. I began to consider poems in textural terms; there were shaggy surfaces, knobbly ones, mere veneers as sleek as glassine, but my favorites were those in which a complex and tensile music prevailed. It goes without saying that such surface texture is not all that goes into a good poem, but it is, I think, an indispensable element. I would not subscribe to Archibald MacLeish's well-worn dictum, in "Ars Poetica," that "A poem should be palpable and mute/ as a globed fruit," but palpability at least must be present. Whatever William Carlos Williams or the Black Mountain School may have proclaimed, a poem is not common speech; it stands apart. An inescapable artifice, which begins in the patterns of vowels and syllables, sets a poem above and beyond mere conversation. We may confer the effect of speech, but it remains an effect. Though it sounds colloquial enough, no one would be likely to say, "Whose woods these are I think I know." The magic lies in the deftly burnished illusion of actual speech.

As I strove to enlarge and complicate my own meager harmonies, I fell into all the pitfalls of the sound-besotted novice. Thus, in one earlier poem (now happily suppressed),

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I hit upon the phrase "barnacle-manacled bottles," which strikes me today as something a Glaswegian with the hiccups might pronounce. The description was apt enough; the sound was atrocious—all those gasping glottal stops! But on a few other occasions the results, I felt, were more felicitous; as, for example, when I tried to describe a group of tough teenagers I had once overheard singing pop songs by The Platters in a tenement hallway and wrote about "the arpeggios of hooligans in stairwells." Whether this line succeeds or not, it seemed to me that I had possibly caught something of what I was striving after. I hadn't consciously sought to juxtapose words derived from Italian or Hindi with English but the combination gave the line the mixture of ironic affection and humor I had found in the scene itself. At the moment of writing, what captivated me was the play of the crunchy double g of "arpeggio" consorting with the long oo of "hooligan" capped by the lovely English compound "stairwell," together with the alternation of quick and slow vowels. Again, in a poem modeled on the Arabic, about the Caliph al-Hakim, I wrote:

> And sometimes, in the pitch-light of the bazaar
> God's shadow baited bears or egged men on
> To braggadocio or fisticuffs, or spied upon
> Their most secretive gestures, their least
> Askance innuendoes, their cupped whispering;
> Till, surrogate, he evanesced on the
> Muqattan Hills
> One evening, leaving only slivered veils behind.

Here it was not only the texture of the words themselves but the cadence that provided what interest there might be in the lines; for I wanted to complicate the measure in a way that suggested, but didn't imitate, Arabic meters. Though my aim is more modest—to show how this process might work "from the inside"—if I continue to quote myself, I will begin to sound like a Classical Arabic poet for whom such shameless self-citation was often *de rigueur*.

Shadow language appears sometimes unexpectedly and in unlikely places. The contemporary poet Timothy Murphy, who farms in North Dakota, writes a wiry, poised, almost runic verse that owes as much to Latin and Anglo-Saxon (he is a translator of *Beowulf*) as to Landor, Housman, and Richard Wilbur. This is the first stanza of "Hadrian Bereaved:"

> The White Nile falls. Osiris dies.
> Egypt wails under winter squalls.
> In the embalmers' pungent halls
> My lover's mummy lies,
> Marvel of mortuary art
> With myrrh and spikenard in its veins.
> A gold-enameled cask contains
> The ashes of his heart.

The tightness of the diction, the perfect rhymes, the gorgeous vocabulary saved from preciousness by the severity of the cadence, reveal the shadings both of the English grand tradition and of the larger classical tradition that nourished it; and yet, it is a shade that has been assimilated and made an integral part of the poet's blood and craft.

We find this effect as well in such older poets as David Jones and Basil Bunting. Jones was of course steeped in Latin and in Welsh, and Bunting had Persian, in addition to French and Latin. There is something paradoxical in this admixture of tongues that brings forth the toughest, strongest, most resonant English in each poet's best work. Jones is too diffuse to cite, but Bunting illustrates exactly what I have in mind, when he writes, in *Briggflats*:

> Dung will not soil the slowworm's
> mosaic. Breathless lark
> drops to nest in sodden trash;
> Rawthey truculent, dingy.
> Drudge at the mallet, the may is down,
> fog on fells. Guilty of spring
> and spring's ending
> amputated years ache after
> the bull is beef, love a convenience.
> It is easier to die than to remember.
> Name and date
> split in soft slate
> a few months obliterate.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

At first glance this appears quintessentially "English": the monosyllabic thrust of the lines, the blunt and serviceable verbs, its gnomic terseness; and yet, it would be easy to show that it is more Roman and lapidary in its origins and has behind it a fierce chiaroscuro of ancient epigraph and inscription, a Latinate granularity of texture. It is the shadow of the hidden languages that casts the poem's rude Anglo-Saxon vigor into the light.

Easily the greatest master of such dense, melodious, and chiseled verse now active is Geoffrey Hill. In reading his last collection *The Orchards of Syon* I was startled to realize that Hill has been writing his incomparable poetry for over fifty years now and that each new book of his has been a fresh, and sometimes unexpected, triumph. The combination of immaculate poetic skill with intense originality is always rare, and never more so than in our diminished age. Perhaps this explains why Hill has been so largely ignored by the purveyors of accolades and fat cash awards; while bevies of mediocrities stagger under their unmerited laurels, Hill continues to compose his grave, raucous, piercing, and marmoreal lyrics, drawing on a huge range of reference to many cultures and languages from antiquity to the present. His moral depth and formal accomplishment have earned him a category all his own, which may be, in the end, acknowledgment enough. For me at least he stands in the same relation to our last half-century as Eliot and Montale, and a very few others, stood to the first half of that hideous time.

Hill plays constantly with shadow language. Moreover, in his recent work, he has begun to introduce surprising new accents, drawing not merely on German or Hebrew or Latin but on American demotic which he, as a transplanted Englishman, hears in perhaps a different manner than we do. Hill's first efforts to incorporate American speech, in *The Triumph of Love*, struck me as clumsy; however, in *The Orchards of Syon*, he slyly employs even "Valley Speak" to salt his metaphysics. In the last of the seventy-two magnificent poems of that collection—one for each year of his life—Hill writes:

> Pollen and basalt—Dame Rainbow, ancient
> lover of water, immortal
> for want of a better term; self-remnant
> in each element of the same desire.
> Not as she once was, metaphysical
> and, like, wild. Weigh the importunate
> nature of being | with a light
> husk, the grasshopper's, tall
> storyteller of the Hesperides . . .

The insertion of "like" in line six represents no mere ironic undermining of the resolutely stately lines that surround it but rather, an attempt—successful, in my view—to extract from that otherwise meaningless colloquialism its fullest measure of resonance. (The vertical downstroke in the next line is Hill's device for marking the caesura.) Hill is here trying to "purify the dialect of the tribe" with the result that Dame Rainbow is no longer wild but, even better, no longer "like, wild," and this almost infinitesimal shift of register, instead of seeming incongruous, somehow makes that luminous old dame vivid in her vagueness.

Throughout *The Orchards of Syon* and even more so in his preceding collection *Speech! Speech!* of 2000 (perhaps his finest achievement to date), Hill weaves together multilingual puns, historical references, allusions to poets he respects (Celan, Ingeborg Bachmann, André Frénaud, and Frank O'Hara [!] among others), with his own clangorous and unmistakable voice. Sometimes it all seems overwhelming, as in the 46th poem of *Speech! Speech!*:

> *Champ d'honneur* versus *Schlachtfeld*: from this
> affray | Prussia emerges the clear victor.
> Is VECTOR now more widely used—if so,
> hów exactly? *Die Zuckerzange, Bitte!*

The foreign phrases, the puzzling allusions, the use of the acute accent to signal the stress, make such passages hard going, and Hill has been criticized recently even by his erstwhile admirers for such antics. How

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

strangely reluctant we have become to accord to a major poet like Hill the toilsome patience exegetes once were willing to lavish, and still lavish, on such lesser works as *Paterson* or even—God help us!—the unreadable *Maximus Poems* of Charles Olson. Part of this may have to do with Hill's unabashed erudition, part with his unflagging nobility of tone. But there is a deeper problem. For Hill, poetry stands as a sacred tongue, and what could be farther from our coddled demotic? Thus he can claim that

> Poetry aspires
> to the condition of Hebrew.

I take this to mean not that poetry constitutes a "dead" language but a language in incessant need of revival; a language at once inviolable and immutable but also sinuously malleable and expansive, utterance in which the vowels flit like the living breath amid the firmly fixed pillars of the consonants. Poetry is not, cannot be, the sacred and God-given tongue but it can aspire to that condition; can be the medium in which a word like Hewbrew *luach* connotes both a blackboard and the Tables of the Law; a form of daily converse overshadowed by an inescapable aura of sanctity.

In the first poem of the sequence Hill challenges us:

> Watch my hands
> confabulate their shadowed rhetoric,
> gestures of benediction; maledictions
> by arrangement.

From *The Triumph of Love* of 1998 through his last two collections, Hill has been "confabulating" a kind of testamentary epic in which the entire history of English, and European, poetry is subsumed, and in which the squalid horrors and sporadic glory of our own age are fitfully mirrored. In so doing he has availed himself of every resource of form and genre and verbal music to fashion his "shadowed rhetoric." Sometimes the music is full-stop in such lines as "To summon from drone-tomb/commotions of calm" and at others, it is jagged, splintered, wailing—"a skirr and pash of shingle"—like the *rime aspre* of Dante:

> My mind, as I know it, I still discover
> in this one-off temerity, arachnidous,
> abseiling into a pit, the pit a void,
> a black hole, a galaxy in denial.

The bleakness of Hill's vision (which is, nevertheless, unflinchingly Christian at root) is offset not so much by sunny passages as by subtle instants of attention, in the interstices of vision, to the small and unregarded—garden herbs, the sudden glance of a landscape, bird calls—and these proffer amid the horror tiny semaphores of grace, however fleeting:

> Curlew and kestrel trek the fell-sides,
> the Hodder burls, a pheasant
> steps from its thorny hedgebank beside us,
> the stooped pear-tree honours us with its shade.

I would not argue that the presence of such shadow language as we find throughout Virgil or Dante or Milton or Pound or Hill is itself a guarantor of great poetry. Certainly there have been many great "unshadowed" poets (think of Wordsworth or Frost). The firmament of poetry is too vast to be reduced to a single mode. And the constant accompaniment of another tongue can be not only burdensome but destructive. The example of the late Joseph Brodsky, whose English verse is almost always farcically inept, stands as an especially distressing caution. For all I know, the graduate students at Baghdad U., under the tutelage of the discoverer of "Shaykh Zubayr," are even now combing through Hill's *oeuvre* and speculating as to how he washed up in Boston Harbor. Even so, in an age when too many poets in North America, whether writing in free verse or strict measure, tend towards the etiolated and the tinny, and when the chatty has supplanted the sublime, it is good to know that Geoffrey Hill is still crafting his shadowy polyphonies.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poetry: a prognosis

by Dick Davis

I think it's a fair bet that if you asked most people on this side of the Atlantic who claim to enjoy reading poetry who their favorite pre-twentieth-century English language poets are, they'd say "Donne and Emily Dickinson": on the other side of the Atlantic the odds are they'd say "Donne and Hopkins." Much as I like a lot of the verse of Donne, and a fair amount of Dickinson, and even a bit (a very little bit) of Hopkins, I think this indicates where the trouble with modern poetry lies. All three are eccentrics: their poems are hard to comprehend and seem to stand in need of explication, though their habitually excited tone makes even the uninitiated feel that some kind of genuine feeling must be there, even if we can't quite paraphrase it; and their technique is to some extent both experimental and *sui generis*. They're odd-balls, whose verses can be both hard to paraphrase and, in the cases of Donne and Hopkins at least, hard to scan. Two contemporary remarks about Donne's poetry have remained famous: King James I's, "Dr. Donne's verses are like the peace of God: they pass all understanding," and Ben Jonson's "Donne, for not keeping of accent, deserved hanging." I suppose most people feel superior to King James and Ben Jonson when they read these remarks: they feel "We know better." But allowing for a little hyperbole (ok, not *all* understanding, and not quite *hanging* maybe) the two remarks seem to me pretty accurate; Donne can be very hard to paraphrase, just as his scansion can be a helter-skelter "Where-the-Hell-Are-We-Now?" business. Neither of these qualities strike me as *ipso facto* virtues in poetry.

But that's the kind of poetry that almost all contemporary poets try to write: meter has become violent and/or vestigial, or absent; and paraphrasable meaning is distinctly démodé. It's been going on for quite a while too. Reading through the new anthology from *Poetry*, which celebrates its first ninety years of publication (and may this ninety be the first of many), an anthology which contains many famous poems and a few fine ones, I experienced a fairly constant sense of discomfort and strain—both to my ear, because the meter (when present) is almost invariably intermittent or violated, and to my comprehension, because I had a hard time paraphrasing much that is there. It's the kind of poetry that strikes me as fun for a while, but only for a while. I find it an intolerable constant diet, like trying to live off over-spiced hors d'oeuvres. Or, to change the simile, like trying to make out a landscape by the fitful light of brilliant fireworks, rather than in steady sunlight. Or like announcing that your favorite composers are Liszt and Charles Ives. Fun as Liszt and Charles Ives might be, to hear nothing but their music would soon get very wearisome indeed.

Timothy Steele in his book *Missing Measures* has traced the process by which the understanding that poetry was some-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thing *more than* language arranged metrically turned into the belief that poetry was something *quite other* than language arranged metrically, and meter, which until the late nineteenth century had been a *sine qua non* of poetry, was thrown out of the window. The same thing seems to have happened to paraphrasable meaning: the recognition that poetry was something more than its language's paraphrasable meaning has become the dogma that paraphrasable meaning is unpoetic, or at least that a poem approaches the poetic in so far as it is unparaphrasable. This would have been a very weird doctrine to anyone before 1800, and to almost anyone before 1900 (that is, in those now almost unimaginable days when large numbers of people besides poets bought, read, and cared about poetry). Even Coleridge, who was hardly the most stalwart advocate of poetic clarity, is on record as saying (in his *Table Talk*) "Poetry is certainly something more than good sense, but it must be good sense at all events; just as a palace is more than a house, but it must be a house, at least." Now however the notion that "real" poetry cannot be paraphrased is the common small change of poetic chit-chat. Recent poets from Britain and Ireland have tended to favor the chthonic and unparaphrasable (Hughes, Hill, and to a somewhat lesser extent Heaney); poets from the United States have generally favored the monotonous sublime variant, derived I suppose mainly from Wallace Stevens (Ashbery, Ammons, Jorie Graham). But none of them, except sometimes Heaney, and very few of their countless epigonoi, seem to be at all keen on calling a spade a spade. As every freshman undergraduate can now tell you, poetry is that stuff that's impossible to understand at first reading; or maybe ever.

Why is this? I think it's the long retreating roar of romanticism, within whose backwash we are still roiling about. Modernism and postmodernism have made no difference to that, at least as far as poetry is concerned. Here's Matthew Arnold, one of Romanticism's high priests, laying down the romantic law: "The difference between genuine poetry and the poetry of Dryden, Pope, and all their school, is briefly this: their poetry is conceived and composed in their wits, genuine poetry is conceived and composed in the soul." And he goes on to say magisterially "Dryden and Pope are classics of our prose." He doesn't like poetry composed in the poets' "wits," that is, by the conscious intelligence that takes account of social, quotidian reality; he likes it to be composed in the soul, the private sanctum of a poet's essence. Poetry is something mysterious to which one submits as before a holy calling (the word "soul" keeps its religious connotations for Arnold), rather than a technique for clarifying and understanding. It becomes private and singular, or as the Greeks said, "idiotic." Poetry becomes less a matter of conscious craftsmanship (the most obvious hallmark of "Dryden, Pope, and all their school") and more a matter of whatever is personal, idiosyncratic, unquantifiable. The conventions of the craft are at a discount; they're secondary and don't matter so much, or perhaps at all. All this, the retreat from the social and from verifiable meaning, the elevation of art into something at once mysterious and idiosyncratic, the deliberate cultivation of an aura of mystery (with its concomitant splitting of the audience into those admitted into the arcana and those left in outer darkness) is a result of a romantic view of art. The distinctive techniques of much of twentieth-century poetry (its various species of surrealism and solipsism, the abandonment of both meter and customary grammar, what J. V. Cunningham called "the device of the proximate word") are products of this same view. We are not interested in talent, only in genius, and every poet wants to be a genius. But then as Valéry said, "Talent without genius is not much, but genius without talent is nothing at all."

And what is the common view of an artistic genius? It's still a romantic view, the view that Wagner proposes in *Die Meister-*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

singer: the artist is the man who is alone, misunderstood, and on the edge of society; he is bursting with energy and insight, and to convey his vision he has to sweep away the old rules, the fusty, fuddy-duddy conventions that smother his boundless talent. Only then will he be able to express his unique, marvelous, shocking, intense, and profoundly personal (and so unparaphrasable, because literally "idiotic") vision. This is how the movies almost invariably present artistic genius, from Michelangelo, to Beethoven, to Van Gogh, to Jackson Pollock, even—God help us—to Mozart. Acquired technique, an understanding of art's strategies and limitations, a concern with social rather than private truths, reason and clarity—they are, such a view implies, for the Beckmessers of this world; they are mere old-fashioned lumber to be swept aside. Heady stuff, but it's hard to imagine Bach or Haydn, Ronsard or Pope, Fra Angelico or Vermeer working like this. Certainly great art involves much more than mastering the techniques of one's métier, but it does involve, I'd suggest, at least that. And for me anyway, even though to be sure great poetry is not simply a matter of metrical competence and paraphrasable meaning, it is at least those two things.

I would like to put Donne and Hopkins out to grass for a while, as invoked poetic forebears. This is not to deny their immense talent (especially Donne's), just to suggest that the kind of poetry their examples have encouraged has had a very long innings indeed, and that it has incidentally lost poetry's lay audience in the process. The breaking of rules is all very well, but I'm pretty sure that good poetry tends to come, as Yeats said, out of "The fascination with what's difficult." It's the easiest thing in the world to break a rule; it can be very difficult to keep one, and to keep many is exponentially more difficult (it's also much more difficult to write interesting sense than it is to write spectacular *non sequiturs*). Again I'd invoke Valéry, "A poet is someone to whom the difficulties of his craft suggest ideas." And while we're in France at the beginning of the twentieth century, I invoke Proust too: "How many poets have fashioned their best lines out of the struggle to find a rhyme?" For good measure I offer one last quotation, this time from Auden: "Blessed be all metrical rules that forbid automatic responses, force us to have second thoughts, free from the fetters of Self."

All this is perhaps to say that I feel we have located the difficulty of poetry in the wrong place. Eliot's famous remark that "Poetry in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult" seems to me to put the cart before the horse. Poetry has always been difficult—for the poet; a degree of difficulty is inherent in the mastery of any craft, and traditionally the poet did as Horace and Yeats both recommended, that is to hide the difficulty as well as he or she could. But now poetry is meant to be difficult for the reader. I think a contributory, and perhaps the primary, reason for this—although it's obviously not the one Eliot was thinking of—is the appropriation of poetry by the academy. It's surely not a coincidence that the study of vernacular poetry as an academic subject was established at almost exactly the same moment that the characteristic hallmarks of contemporary poetry—the weakening of meter, the devaluing of paraphrasable meaning—began to emerge. Modern poetry needs explication, and its metrical structure is often anyone's guess, and it emerged at the moment when the explication of vernacular poetry became a profession. New poetry that did not need explication, that appeared to be both transparent in meaning and conventional in meter, and which had a literate (but not necessarily academically trained) audience, was held in academic contempt (and by many still is). We can see this if we look at the fortunes of A. E. Housman's reputation: despite the once immense popularity of his verse it was, until fairly recently, either ignored or treated with great condescension by the academy. Now the popularity has declined, and Housman's academic stock is rising. Why? Because the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

poems are no longer as transparent to a contemporary reader as they once were; they begin to need explication. Would-be poets tend to study poetry at university, and universities tend to teach poems that give the teacher something impressive to do. Neophyte poets learn that good poems are "difficult," and so that is what they write. The system is satisfyingly self-perpetuating; but the common reader ("that legendary cretin" as Dylan Thomas is said to have called him) is left out in the process. Less so in Britain and Ireland than here it must be said, but even there the writers of obviously engaging, intelligent, and accessible verse (I don't think those three adjectives together constitute an oxymoron) seem to be dwindling in number.

So who would I suggest instead of Donne and Hopkins? There are many candidates, but perhaps Pope (his narratives and expository poems) and Christina Rossetti (her lyrics) would do as well as any. There we will find clarity, intelligence, metrical precision, sophisticated, and highly nuanced feeling, the desire for understanding; in short light in preference to darkness, and "wit" in all the best senses of the word. Two things we won't find are ragged meter and, for all the focused intensity of Rossetti's lyric feeling, unparaphrasable solipsism. Naturally I'm not saying that we should produce pastiche Pope and Rossetti, there's no point at all in doing that. I'm invoking them as exemplars of a particular attitude towards the craft: I'd like recent poetry to be to their work as most recent poetry is in fact to the work of Donne and Hopkins in the ways I've just suggested; that is I'd like it if modern poets took the virtues of Rossetti and Pope—virtues which seem to me to be almost entirely absent from contemporary poetry, with a few signal exceptions—as exemplary.

Of course what I'd like is neither here nor there. When I get *really* pessimistic about the state of poetry I sometimes feel that the tradition of high culture in poetry has perhaps exhausted itself, and that if poetry is ever again to speak to people outside the charmed circle of would-be and self-styled poets (and their explicators), regeneration must come from elsewhere. Perhaps we're at a moment like that in the Middle-Ages when new vernaculars simply side-stepped a clerical Latinate tradition that had grown hopelessly moribund. The obvious place to look for such a regeneration would be in the lyrics of popular music. For example Country Music, with its penchant for epigrammatic narrative and often ingenious rhymes, and Rap with its asocial energy and mixture of linguistic playfulness and aggression (a lot of Rap lyrics are very like Skelton), have both successfully taken over techniques that poetry once cherished and has now largely abandoned. Most Country Music may not have the emotional sophistication of a Campion or a Hardy, or most Rap the corrosively accurate fury of a Swift or a Rochester, but Rome wasn't built in a day and they are recognizably doing the kinds of things that Hardy and Swift were doing, and they speak to very large numbers of people for that reason, just as Hardy and Swift have done. Perhaps that's where the future of poetry lies. But most of the time I still stubbornly hope for poetry's regeneration from within its own tradition:

> Now at the last gasp of Love's latest breath,
> When, his pulse failing, Passion speechless lies,
> When Faith is kneeling by his bed of death,
> And Innocence is closing up his eyes,
> Now, if thou would'st, when all have given
> him over,
> From death to life thou might'st him yet
> recover.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Winters's curse

by Adam Kirsch

"A critic may even be specifically wrong yet theoretically right. Paul Elmer More, for instance, damns all modern literature with one irritated and uncomprehending gesture; he is academic and insensitive. The tragedy of it is, that most modern writers could learn a great deal from him if they did not find his irritation so irritating."

When he wrote these lines, in 1930, Yvor Winters was a young instructor at Stanford University, and a poet well regarded in avant-garde circles; his first book of criticism was still seven years in the future. Yet in describing More, a sage of the neo-Humanist movement, Winters gave an oddly precise verdict on his own career as a critic of poetry. Of all the eminent poet-critics of his generation—John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, R. P. Blackmur—none is more often "irritating," "insensitive," and "specifically wrong" than Winters. These qualities made him a figure first of controversy, then of mockery. But it is also true that, thirty-five years after his death, poets and readers of poetry have important things to learn from Winters—as long as we are prepared to be irritated.

For to read Winters with profit means reading him with suspicion, even resistance. His personality on the page is unpleasant—arrogant, sarcastic, brutal in controversy—and his views are not argued but promulgated, like papal bulls. Indeed, Winters presents himself as poetry's anti-Pope, relentless in his heresies about the nature and history of the art. Any poet conventionally regarded as major Winters treats as a buffoon or worse: Wordsworth, for instance, is "notable mainly for a handful of fine lines and short passages and for his infinitely tedious pomposity and foolishness." Poets the educated reader has never heard of, however, are precariously elevated: Jones Very and F. G. Tuckerman replace Emerson and Whitman as the nineteenth-century American masters. Whole centuries are put under interdict:

> If I were to say that there was little or no English poetry of real distinction between Chaucer and Wyatt, few people would be surprised: the text-books tell us the same thing. I am telling my reader now that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were low periods in the history of English poetry; the text-books will convey this message to my reader's grandchildren.

Winters wrote as if he were separating the saved from the damned, and he demanded total adherence to his creed. Over his long teaching career, he assembled a coterie of true believers, for whom he propagandized vigorously. Of these, Edgar Bowers, J. V. Cunningham, and Thom Gunn went on to win wider acclaim, but most of the others are remembered, if at all, only for their association with Winters. Sometimes—as in the pages of *Quest for Reality*, the anthology Winters co-edited—this makes his canon

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

seem like a toy kingdom, a Monaco of poetry existing in placid unrelation to the empire all around it.

Rather than submit so completely to Winters, any sensible reader would choose to join the distinguished ranks of his opponents, which included Stanley Edgar Hyman ("We find Yvor Winters . . . an excessively irritating and bad critic") and Delmore Schwartz ("Mr. Winters . . . displays prejudices which are wholly arbitrary"). But in the history of criticism there has not been so much intelligence that we can afford to ignore any of it, even when it is buried as deeply as Winters sometimes buried it. He deserves to be read sympathetically, with attention not just to his outrageous conclusions but to his serious and still compelling motives.

To understand how Winters ended up at his peculiar critical terminus, it is crucial to see where started out. Born in 1900, the son of a stockbroker, he was raised in Los Angeles, Seattle, and Chicago, where he enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1917. But his studies were immediately derailed by tuberculosis, which sent him to a New Mexico sanatorium for nearly three years. The result was that Winters was largely an autodidact; though he made literary friends (including the young Glenway Wescott) and had an extensive correspondence, his sensibility was formed in nearly complete isolation. This was unfortunate, not so much for his knowledge—he read furiously and widely—as for his temperament. As early as 1921, he admitted to Marianne Moore that he had "a rather dogmatic nature," and dogmatism quickly hardened into arrogance. At the age of twenty-four, for example, he told Harriet Monroe that "I have, in the past few years, conducted investigations into the nature of poetic method farther than anyone else, past or present, has ever done."

Much of what is objectionable in Winters, then, can be chalked up to simple provincialism. Even after he left the sanatorium, he remained far from the centers of culture: he taught school in a mining camp, studied at the University of Idaho in Moscow, and finally earned a doctorate at Stanford, where he spent the next forty years. At the age of thirty-two, he wrote to Lincoln Kirstein that "I have never been east of Wolf Lake, Indiana, and have lived mostly in obscure and remote villages." One result was that, as he admitted, "there may be much in modern urban life that I do not understand." (This may explain his entire failure to grasp the power of "The Waste Land," which he called, on its publication, "by all odds the worst thing Eliot has done.") More profoundly, his isolation meant that Winters was always his own greatest authority. He redrew the map of American literary culture, so that Palo Alto became the capital and New York the boondocks; as he wrote to Malcolm Cowley in 1957, "I know that you all regard me as an eccentric. But you are the eccentrics, or rather the provincials."

While isolation bred eccentricty and resentment, however, it also gave Winters the confidence to dissent completely from the standard literary opinions of his day—which have become the standard literary history of our own. And this dissent was founded, not on bad temper, but on a principled objection to the basic assumptions of modern poetry.

Winters's mature view of poetry grew out of his encounter with Hart Crane. The two men were already friends when, in 1927, Winters wrote a review praising *White Buildings* as a masterpiece. Specifically, he valued Crane for being representative of the age, essentially modern: "a poet who accepts his age in its entirety, accepts it with passion, and who has the sensitive equipment to explore it." Three years later, however, the friendship collapsed when Winters published a profoundly negative review of *The Bridge* in *Poetry*. It was not that Winters had lost respect for Crane's abilities: the difference was that, where Crane had previously been significant for his virtues, he now seemed still more significant for his vices. *The Bridge* was a "public catastrophe,"

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

a document of intellectual chaos, and it showed that Crane was "headed precisely nowhere." Winters predicted, accurately as it turned out, that Crane would "develop a sentimental leniency toward his vices and become wholly their victim." In other words, Crane still "accept[ed] his age in its entirety," but now it seemed to Winters that the age itself was killing him.

All of Winters's later criticism can be seen as a diagnosis of Crane's sickness. Indeed, the matter was still more urgent, for Winters himself felt the allure of disintegration. As he wrote to R. P. Blackmur in 1936, "I had a capacity for going under and might have done it." His confrontation with Crane and with modernism was almost literally an exorcism, as he wrote in his most moving essay, "The Significance of 'The Bridge' by Hart Crane: or What Are We to Think of Professor X?": "If we enter the mind of a Crane, a Whitman, or an Emerson with our emotional faculties activated and our reason in abeyance, these writers may possess us as surely as demons were once supposed to possess the unwary."

In linking Crane to Whitman and Emerson, Winters suggests the basis of his new critique of modern poetry. All three were ruined, in his view, by what he defines as the Romantic theory of literature, which "assumes that literature is mainly or even purely an emotional experience." Because the Romantics believe that human nature is essentially good, they see poetry as a matter of letting the emotions speak for themselves, freed from the interference of rational thought. "Literature thus becomes a form of what is popularly known as self-expression. It is not the business of man to understand and improve himself, for such an effort is superfluous: he is good as he is, if he will only let himself alone, or, as we might say, let himself go."

Winters's best criticism—it is collected in the volume *In Defense of Reason*—traces the effects of this Romantic error on modern American literature. Crane represents the extreme case, a man who deliberately deranged his own intellect in order to make contact with the irrational sources of poetry. As he implored the Indian medicine-man in a famous passage from "The Bridge": "Lie to us,—dance us back the tribal morn!" But Winters sees more subtle taints in virtually every major modern poet. In a brilliant essay on T. S. Eliot, he shows, through sustained attention to Eliot's criticism, that this self-proclaimed classicist is in fact a Romantic fatalist, who believes that "our individual natures are determined for us, and our actual way of feeling cannot be changed." To Winters, this represents a dangerous abdication of reason: "if we are bound to express our emotions without understanding them, we obviously have no way of judging or controlling them."

Control, in fact, is the key word in Winters's aesthetics: "The spiritual control in a poem," he writes, "is simply a manifestation of the spiritual control within the poet." With an intensity that approaches the neurotic, he fears losing control, and fears the poets who seem to approve or abet such a loss. In *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943), Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and John Crowe Ransom are all prosecuted for their encouragement of emotional irresponsibility. In *Maule's Curse* (1938), he traces the same vice through the nineteenth-century American classics. Mostly free from the personal abuse and polemic of his essays on living writers, it is his most appealing book of criticism; the studies of Poe, Melville and James are especially fascinating and perceptive.

Fear of loss of control sharpens Winters's critical senses, but it also leads him to an exceedingly narrow understanding of what poetic control means and looks like. He proposes that, for a poem to respectably rational, it must explicitly repudiate anything irrational, overly emotional, vague, or obscure. *Primitivism and Decadence* (1937) is largely a catalog of such prohibitions, with illustrations from contemporary poets. Finally, the only acceptable poems seem to be those which demonstrate "a feeling of dignity and of self-control in the face of a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

situation of major difficulty": that is, what Winters called in a letter "the good bitter stoicism of Hardy and Emily Dickinson." It is in obedience to this criterion that Winters prefers Tuckerman's poem "The Cricket" to "Song of Myself"; and purely on his own terms, he is right to do so.

But faced with such a preference, we cannot avoid the conclusion that somewhere along the line there has been a mistake. Winters makes an a priori judgment, based on sound moral arguments, about what poetry ought to do, and then judges individual poems by that standard. But real critical judgment is dialectical; it proceeds not just from rule to example, but also from example to rule. The reader's actual, albeit suspect, reaction to a poem may be refined in the course of critical judgment, but it cannot be simply negated or ignored. In other words, if it comes down to a theory or two centuries' worth of the most beloved poems in English, it is the theory that must yield.

This does not mean, however, that Winters's reasoning must be entirely abandoned. What is needed is a more sophisticated and supple concept of poetic control, which can yield more accurate and fruitful judgments of individual poems. In writing about Allen Tate's sonnet "The Subway," Winters suggests that the poet's "feeling of dignity and self-control" is "inseparable from what we call poetic form," since "the creation of a form is nothing more nor less than the act of evaluating or shaping (that is, controlling) a given expeirence." But this suggests that only the feeling of self-control is compatible with poetic expression, which is patently untrue. Poetry can also give form to embarrassment ("The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), despair (Hopkins's "terrible" sonnets), nervous exaltation (Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty"), or still more questionable emotions.

In fact, the only tenable criterion of a poem's merit is fidelity to experience, including the most ambiguous and troubling phases of experience. Winters faults poets like Laforgue and Eliot for expressing "a state of moral insecurity which the poet sees no way to improve"; but often, perhaps most of the time, we do not see a way to improve our weaknesses, and to say otherwise would be artistically dishonest. This is why, as great writers from Plato to Thomas Mann have reminded us, there is something essentially immoral about poetry. The only possible compromise between the standards of art and the standards of ethics is a version of Aristotle's: that the experience of pity and terror benefits the reader as a purgation or, what is more likely, as a consolation. If a reader is so far gone in moral invalidism that poetry is an immediate danger to him—as Winters thought it was to Crane, and feared it would be to himself—then the only solution is for him to avoid poetry altogether. What makes Winters seem perverse is that he will neither avoid art for the sake of morality, nor silence his narrow morality for the sake of art; instead, he tries to make art conform to the demands of morality. It is a Procrustean solution, and leads him to amputate much of the corpus of English poetry.

If Winters is wrong to demand that the poem "control" the experience it treats, however, he is right to ask that the poem "shape" that experience. Some of Winters's sharpest criticism was directed at poets who took the opposite approach, believing that a poem's subject matter should dictate its form—so that, for instance, mental confusion should be expressed in a confused and disjointed poem. This error, which he named "the fallacy of imitative form," is still more prevalent in our own time. Many of today's most ambitious and highly praised poets take as their subject consciousness itself, with the goal of mimicking in verse the precise motions of intellection. In very different ways, the metaphor of the transcript guides the poetry of John Ashbery and of Jorie Graham. But neither of these poets, not to mention their many epigones, succeeds in capturing "the way it feels to think," since this kind of mimesis is foreign to the very nature of poetry. They do succeed, however, in destroying the subtle

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

music of verse, which can only exist within a highly organized form; still worse, they destroy their acolytes' ability and desire to hear that music. The best argument for formal poetry remains Winters's pragmatic one: "the absence of a metrical frame accounting for the agreement or variation of every syllable . . . makes exact and subtle variation and suggestion impossible."

In making this defense of form, at a time when form was increasingly seen as outmoded, Winters set another important example for today's poets and critics. He refused to engage in the extreme historicism, sponsored by Eliot, which made a god of the "modern" and demanded that poets try to express it. This is simply another version of the fallacy of expressive form—the belief, as Winters summarized it, "that [the] age must give [the poet] not merely his subject matter but his entire spiritual shape, as it were, so that the form of his art will be determined by the quality of his age." As we have seen in the generations since Modernism, competition for the favors of the Zeitgeist leads to a self-annihilating series of schools and styles, each claiming to be "what comes next." This itch for novelty reduces the reader to the status of a consumer, keeping up with the latest makes and models. Worse, it leads the poet to neglect the mastery of traditional form, which alone allows meaningful departures from tradition.

At the same time, Winters's career also serves as a warning about the cost of battling the idols of the age. Bitterly aware that his views were considered outmoded—that he was "not a recipient of the grace of the Zeitgeist"—Winters responded by retreating into a ghetto of his own making. We find in Winters the first example of what might be called, echoing his own coinage, the problem of defensive form. Increasingly over the last hundred years, poets have been haunted by the knowledge that to write in traditional meters is to take a position, however unwillingly, in the sterile combat of "conservative" (or "formalist") and "avant-garde." And since this contest was defined, waged, and to most appearances won by the avant-garde, the conservative position is a thankless one. To drown out the accompanying self-doubt, Winters turned his criticism into a roar. Indeed, his last book, *Forms of Discovery*, published just before his death, ends with something very like a curse on the age, looking forward to the day when "my distinguished reader, his favorite poets, his favorite subjects, and all the members of his elite group will have turned to dust." It is the critic as Coriolanus, impotently banishing his banishers.

But this proud isolation is, finally, just as much a victory for the Zeitgeist as the most slavish submission. Winters allowed the thesis of modernism to turn him into a mere antithesis, where what was needed was the nimble transcendence of the old opposites. That remains the challenge for poets and critics today, and it is no easier now than it was for Winters. Serious poets still seek to master the traditional forms and subjects, without becoming reactionary or antiquarian; to be of their moment naturally, not deliberately; to shape experience without tyrannically controlling it. In all of these tasks, we should not miss the opportunity to learn from Winters's insights, from his example—and from his mistakes.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

New poems
by Glyn Maxwell, David Barber, A. E. Stallings & Ben Downing

The thirteenth storey

As we flickered up the storeys
the child reflected everywhere
in the mirrors of the elevator

had to know the reason
there was no thirteenth storey.
Her father said as little

as was possible in public,
a reticence the bellhop
beamed at like a secret,

but I, likewise reflected,
could have told her with my five mouths
about a ride in Florida

that drops you like a bungee,
plummets you in total dark!
guess how many storeys.

And thereby meets demand
for that. I would have told her,
had I not got out before them,

still in the lower twenties,
I have a serious answer
if you're seriously asking.

—Glyn Maxwell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Ghost out of work

I died and I tried haunting Massachusetts.
Had I died inexplicably, bizarrely?
I begged their pardon: No. Had I not lived
in a Gothic homestead, never trod the stairs
of turrets? I tried haunting Massachusetts.

I died and I applied in my best suit.
Ahem, they didn't even cough. They made
that sound: ahem. Did I not have a costume?
Was my love doomed, was she a chambermaid,
an heiress? I roamed all of Massachusetts

in search of work. Was I accused unjustly
in a witch-trial? Or justly? They sat forward,
interested. Er, no. Car-accident.
They sat back. But I died in Massachusetts.
They nodded, they could see my application.

And in what areas of Massachusetts
would I be sighted if I did indeed
return? I reeled off various dear suburbs,
a seafood restaurant, a Barnes and Noble;
Fenway. In that suit? Somebody sniggered.

I died and I do not haunt Massachusetts.
You haven't seen me. I was ushered out
politely. I was told of openings
in Illinois. I headed for South Station,
not a care in the world. Nobody stopped me.

—Glyn Maxwell

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Rogue moss

Emboldened now, no longer earthbound,
No more shrinking into the shadowy lee
As if plain sight were a station
Not for a moment to be contemplated,
Shunning attention, renouncing ambition.

Finespun still, but with a newfound fervor—
None of that tremulous aversion
To exposure, that fanatical clinging
To fastidious humility, which is itself
A form of overweening vanity.

Lovely, the seeping cranny, sweet
The rift where the mortar gives, the fissure
Shivering through the loose garden slate—
Possible to hold fast to all this
Obliging neglect and still aspire.

Aroused, impelled, sensing the main chance
At last: the boxy cinderblock garage
Put up who knows when, no pitch
To that slab roof, rainwater pooling
For days on end, tarpaper all rot and tatter.

Flaring this morning, distinctly glimmering,
First thing one spots from the porch upslope—
Fetching woven stuff, a living velvet sheen
Stealing across that blistered surface
Like a desert prophecy come to pass.

Still emblematic of all that's delicate,
Everything chastened and constrained,
But with a steelier glint, as if to offer proof
That here is how another nature might yet
Make itself felt: ascendant, rampant, plush.

—David Barber

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Mornings I walk past the first cemetery of Athens

Like a widow, every day the grey Dawn comes
To the Proto Nekrotapheío, and sweeps the crumbs
Of Night from tombstones, and the marble busts.

The stone cutter in his workshop contemplates,
Chisel in hand, the blank face of clean slates.
The waitress at the café mops and dusts.

A priest sits at his newspaper and tarries
Over the headlines and obituaries.

Soon, the mourners gather there to drain
The thick black liquid to the bitter grain.
At the Office of Endings, a hunched man taps his thumbs.

Four diggers play a hand of cards to kill
A little time; two withered florists fill
The old foam wreaths with new chrysanthemums.

—A. E. Stallings

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Variations on an old standard

Come let us kiss. This cannot last—
Too late is on its way too soon—
And we are going nowhere fast.

Already it is after noon,
That momentary palindrome.
The mid-day hours start to swoon—

Around the corner lurks the gloam.
The sun flies at half-mast, and flags.
The color guard of bees heads home,

Whizzing by in zigs and zags,
Weighed down by the dusty gold
They've hoarded in their saddlebags,

All the summer they can hold.
It is too late to be too shy:
The Present tenses, starts to scold—

Tomorrow has no alibi,
And hides its far side like the moon.
The bats inebriate the sky,

And now mosquitoes start to tune
Their tiny violins. I see,
Rising like a grey balloon,

The head that does not look at me,
And in its face, the shadow cast,
The Sea they call Tranquility—

Dry and desolate and vast,
Where all passions flow at last.
Come let us kiss. It's after noon,
And we are going nowhere fast.

—*A. E. Stallings*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Fontanelle

. . . so called because it shows a rhythmical
pulsation produced by the flow of blood
in the vessels of the brain.
—Webster's

The boggy spot atop her skull,
which would at birth accommodate
the whole pad of my thumb, of late
has disappeared—parietal

bones now fused into a full
and obdurate concavity.
How comforting to know that she
no longer is so vulnerable,

at least in that one crucial place.
But part of me half-misses it,
the chink in her small basinet,
and tempts me almost to embrace

the crackpot views of those poor nuts
who have nostalgically trepanned
themselves, or had themselves trepanned;
by drilling through their sinciputs,

they draw more blood into the brain
—supposedly—and thus restore
the magic buoyancy of yore,
that infantile, Wordsworthian

consciousness extinguished by
the closing of their crania.
No need for such a mania,
however, since already I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

detect that some new aperture,
pierced in me when she was born
as if by tiny unicorn,
has widened out in pace with her

own portal's slow diminishment.
I sense it, this phenomenon,
not in my head but lower down:
a fluttering thoracic vent

that, artesian, lets feeling well,
then pumps it forth in measured spate
to course and lap and irrigate
—a kind of second fontanelle.

—Ben Downing

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letter from Paris

Anglo-saxon attitudes

by Theodore Dalrymple

One of the questions that always crosses my mind when I visit Paris is, What do unintelligent or uneducated people read there? Certainly, the daily newspapers cannot meet their requirements: *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Le Figaro* (to say nothing of *L'Humanité*) strenuously eschew the wilful vulgarity that the British are inclined to mistake for vigor and a critical spirit, but which is, in reality, just plain old vulgar vulgarity. I confess that it is a relief to read for once newspapers that do not worship at the shrine of meretricious celebrity, and assume that their readers might actually be interested in the affairs of faraway countries of which they currently know nothing. But their circulations are small, at least by British standards: and the rest is silence.

I confess also to a mild frisson of irritation—so tonic in the mornings as one sits in a café—at their incessant use of the word "anglo-saxon" as a term if not of outright abuse, at least of thin-lipped and not well-veiled disapprobation. What does "anglo-saxon" mean in this context, exactly? In the mental economy of the French intelligentsia, it means crass, shallow, and vulgarly materialistic, though also regrettably powerful and attractive to lesser breeds without culture. It plays the same role as the term "judaeo-masonic" once did in the minds of some of the less intellectually distinguished, though perhaps more historically influential, political philosophers of the twentieth century.

Of course, I know as I experience my brief frisson of irritation that I shall experience precisely the same frisson as soon as I return home. And what will irritate me? All the crass, shallow, and vulgarly materialistic people I see around me. Only their mysterious, preternatural power is missing from the judaeo-masonic version. And the worst thing about the British is that they are materialistic without being very good at it.

Still, this gets us no nearer the answer to the question as to what unintelligent and uneducated Frenchmen read. The bookshops—in which I spend quite a few of my waking hours in Paris—provide no answer. France is definitely not the land of the airport novel, to say nothing of the less elevated literary genres. One looks in vain for the garish paperbacks that make up so much of the merchandise in a modern British bookshop. (Incidentally, there are far more independent bookshops in the land of Colbertian *dirigisme* than there are in the homeland of Smithian free enterprise where, in the name of competition, bookselling has been almost entirely consolidated into one or two enormous chains. With regard to book publishing and selling, at least in England, Karl Marx was right.)

Nor do the French seem to go in much for self-help or personal development, those manifestations (deep in one sense and shallow in another) of popular self-absorption. On the other hand, they have an insatiable appetite for something far worse: the prose

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

of psychoanalysts. And it goes almost without saying that the French psychoanalysts can out-obscure those of any other nation, and drive an intelligent, literate person insane within the space of a paragraph. The laws of the marketplace suggest that these books must be bought, but we are no more entitled to conclude from this that they are read than a doctor may conclude that his patient takes his medicine merely because he is prescribed it.

It is also true that the works of the current French *maîtres à penser*—Jacques Derrida chief among them—are available everywhere. Their pretentiousness can addle a perfectly adequate brain almost as quickly as heat can coagulate the albumin of egg-white. Not long ago, for example, I attended a conference of French intellectuals at which a Lacanian gave a lecture. It was only two-thirds of the way through that he realized that he was reading out the pages in the wrong order: something which, to do him justice, no one in the audience had detected either. I was one of the few who found this both amusing and significant: most of the audience took it as being one of the hazards of profundity.

However, it would be quite wrong to assume that the whole of French literary and intellectual life is dominated by the flatulent charlatanry for which it has been so esteemed in British and American universities. The fact is that French bookshops are admirable, far more admirable on the whole than their British and American counterparts.

It is frequently alleged that the French are insular, parochial, and provincial, still believing that a few *arrondissements* of Paris are the center of the universe, at least in its cultural manifestations, around which the rest of the world palely orbits. Certainly, they remain proud of their historical accomplishments, which by any standards are amongst the greatest in the world: there is not a single field of higher human endeavor in which they have not distinguished themselves. But who reads French literature now—I mean contemporary literature, or that written in the last few years? How much is translated, and who feels the need any longer to watch what the French are doing?

My conditions of life do not permit me to read many modern French novels, but those few that I do read (admittedly selected on the grounds of promising subject matter and opening pages) do not strike me as below the English or American standard: quite the contrary. Perhaps this is not saying much, or damning with faint praise, but several novels I have read—for example, Didier van Cauwelaert's *Un Aller simple*, which won the Prix Goncourt—were certainly worthy of translation, which they have never received. Because the conditions of modern mass society, with its profound flattening of the human character, are so difficult to tackle in novel form, or indeed in any other artistic way, many of the best contemporary French novels I have read have concerned far-flung places, exile or expatriation, rather than France itself: an evasion on the part of writers, perhaps, but not one unique to the French. When British authors tackle their own mass society, they usually do so with intellectual dishonesty combined with adolescent smuttiness: consequently their productions (evasive in a different way) are, from the literary point of view, quite worthless.

Evasion is not in any case the same as parochialism. French bookshops are indicative of a general reading public much less parochial than the British or American. The books about foreign parts by French journalists exceed in number and quality those available in English, all the more surprising because of the very much smaller size of the francophone market. Moreover, the emphasis on literature translated from other languages exceeds by several orders of magnitude that found in Britain and America: and this, as I have suggested, is not because of the inferiority of contemporary French literary production. It is because of a greater openness to the possibility that what is

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

written in Finnish, Albanian, Hungarian, Rumanian, Latvian, or Portuguese may actually be well worth reading. This is genuine cosmopolitanism.

The French are quicker off the mark with translation than we, therefore, and this is surely much to their credit. While in Paris recently, for example, I made the acquaintance (by reading) of a young Russian author called Alexander Ikonnikov, who has just published a book entitled *Dernières nouvelles du bourbier*, "Latest News from the Dump." Unable to publish it in Russia, where readers (according to the review in *Le Monde*) do not want to be confronted in print by the quotidian reality of their lives, preferring a literary diet of escapism, Ikonnikov was first obliged to publish his book—written partly in Russian, partly in German, which he studied at university—in Germany. It has not yet been translated into English, if it ever will be: but it is the work of a modern Gogol.

The author, who is twenty-nine, has the gift of conveying a whole, and wholly absurd, world within the compass of three pages. His book is a series of very brief sketches of post-communist Russia, and if anyone were inclined to doubt that old habits die hard, this account of the Dump—that is to say Russia—should convince him otherwise.

The first story, in a section ironically entitled "Russia, Great Russia," is called "The Leg." The cowherd Krotova, "*sous l'empire de la boisson*," has an argument with her husband, and cuts off his leg with an axe. He is taken to hospital, but the wound is so clean that the doctor "had only to remove some remaining skin."

Krotova is taken to the police station accompanied by the leg. She is about to be released when someone asks "What about the leg?" The police captain orders it taken to the morgue, but the attendant refuses to accept it: he cannot accept a limb without its corpse, and the rest of the man is still alive. (I once knew a doctor in Zambia, to whose clinic an African brought a human leg, asking for a death certificate.)

The police instead decide to bury the leg in the forest, over the border of the next police district. Unfortunately, it is found there, and the person who finds it, Old Katya, starts a rumor that there is a local Jack the Ripper abroad. The army is sent in to search for him:

> They didn't find any Jack the Rippers; but they did find six undeclared firearms, two stolen cars, a parachute dating from the Second World War, and sixteen illicit stills.

Many of the police in whose district the leg was buried are dismissed for incompetence, while—"fortunately"—the police who buried it are not punished at all.

> The captain and his men had the courage not to say a word. And, take note, they have retained their silence to this day.

This is satire of the very highest order: three pages of which tell you more about the reality of Russia than hundreds of pages of much lesser writing. I go to Paris, and learn about Russia.

And everywhere else, if I so wish. Paris is by far the best city in the world for cinema, at least if you accept my premise that the best and most interesting films are made in the most unlikely places: as they undoubtedly are. Not long ago, I spent a week in Paris while my mother-in-law was recovering from an operation. I went twice and sometimes three times a day to the little subsidized cinemas that show foreign films, and could have done so forever, without seeing the same film twice: I never left Paris, but I circumnavigated the world in seven days. In one cinema, showing a Venezuelan film, I was the only member of the audience, which took me back to the day twenty years ago when I flew as the only passenger in an airliner, a Boeing 737, of a so-called commercial airline, from the island of Nauru in the Pacific to Singapore, a distance of about 5000 miles. Of course, the service on board was terrible—the hostesses

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

were too busy gossiping to attend to my few wants.

The outstanding film that I saw during that week was a full-length Belgian documentary about the life of the late Marshal Mobutu Sese Seko (whose Zaire I once traversed). What was so extraordinary about this film—apart from its intrinsically fascinating subject matter—was that it led you, by slow degrees, from despising the man to feeling the deepest human sympathy and respect for him, until finally you saw him in the presence (on a South African warship) of his successor, Laurent Kabila: and the mere comparison of their faces and deportment tells you all you need to know about the prospects of improvement in that ravaged land. Reflection upon the totally unanticipated revolution in your emotions within the space of two brief hours acts, or should act, to deepen your response to the world: and everyone left the cinema in the silence of contemplation.

This time, though, I went to an Algerian film called *Rachida*, about the violence in which Algeria has been submerged since the annulment of the elections, that—among other effects—has caused thousands of Algerians to seek refuge (and some of them, no doubt, to raise funds for terrorist causes) in Britain, some of them indeed not fifty yards from where I write this. Without appealing to the popular appetite for stylized, pornographic violence, the film conveyed the fathomless brutality of the conflict. It will not be widely shown in Britain, of course, if at all: for we are too parochial to take an avid interest even in our own affairs.

After the film, we—my wife, my sister- and brother-in-law—staggered next door to La Coupole. I worried about the luxury indulged in so soon after catharsis. I had oysters, and a wonderful *carré d'agneau*. All the while, questions nagged away at the back of my mind: why was life so good to me, so bad to others, what had I done to deserve my good fortune? I inflamed my conscience further with a *café liègeois*. But would any Algerian be the better off if I forwent it? The dialectic between the big questions and the pleasures of the flesh continues. But I still don't know what unintelligent and uneducated Frenchmen read. Of course, there are some in what they call the Hexagon who still think that unintelligent and uneducated Frenchmen is a contradiction in terms.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Theater

Luck of the Irish?

by Mark Steyn

It is a sad fact that, whatever its merits in other respects, Irish independence has been a disaster for Irish drama. Since casting off the shackles of their English oppressor, the auld sod's playwrights have been mired in a mawkish parochialism from which they seem barely able to lift their eyes to the broader horizon before slumping back to the comforting emerald glow of stage Irishness. This can be very lucrative, of course, but it owes more to Tin Pan Alley's synthetic shamrock ballads of a century ago ("Did Your Mother Come From Ireland?," etc.) than to any living dramatic tradition, and at least those teary parlor songs could plead in mitigation that they were mostly written by pretend bog-trotters.

Two current New York productions make the point with alarming clarity: the Pearl Theatre Company's *Heartbreak House* by George Bernard Shaw and Lincoln Center's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* by Frank McGuinness, one of the stars of the current generation, if one is to judge from the frequency with which his plays are staged internationally. I've seen both works on several previous occasions, but not since September 11 gave a topical resonance to their subject: the Great War. For all the Saddam=Hitler/UN=Munich/De Villepin=Chamberlain stuff casually bandied about, the First World War seems far more germane—not just because we're dealing with unfinished business from the post-Ottoman Anglo-French invention of the "Middle East," but because September 10, 2001 has unsettling echoes of August 1914, the last Edwardian summer. Ours was not the first generation to enjoy a "holiday from history." Here is Shaw's preface:

> *Heartbreak House* is not merely the name of the play which follows this preface. It is cultured, leisured Europe before the war. When the play was begun, not a shot had been fired; and only the professional diplomatists and the very few amateurs whose hobby is foreign policy even knew that the guns were loaded.

Now who does that sound like?

The dramatist was exaggerating his prescience: when the play was begun—on March 4, 1916—more than a few shots had been fired, and, more importantly, the first Zeppelin air raids on London were fifteen months old. The latter made more of an impression: the greatest empire the world had ever known could be struck not only in remote, primitive colonial outposts but also in the heart of its mighty capital. Shaw wrote much of the play in Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Sussex garden, from which the gunfire across the Channel was clearly audible.

The illusion of invulnerability is but one of Shaw's themes. The heartbreak house of the title is an English country home, whose inhabitants are absorbed in their own peculiar preoccupations, beginning with Captain Shotover's wild and crazy quest for a mystical "seventh degree of concentra-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

tion." His daughters are aging temptresses, posh teases getting by on surface charm. The men, for all their nominal power in finance and world affairs, are in the end weaklings, unmanned by high-class women—or, if you prefer, castrated by Edwardian society. Shaw ventures into some truly lame Wildean epigram-peddling—there are only two classes in England, the equestrian class and the neurotic class. That must have been a damp squib even eighty years ago, and, if I had to make a case for it to a latterday cast, I'd look on it as a Shavian subversion of Wilde. This, after all, is the drawing-room comedy to end them all—the one where Shaw wraps up the show by blowing up the drawing room.

That's the most important theme—history unraveling, the sense that this isn't just a war but the smashing of the known order. Now that *is* prescient, whether written in August 1914 or March 1916. No one in that early phase foresaw that by 1919 three of the world's great empires—Russia, Austria, and Turkey—would lie shattered. Shaw was writing a state-of-the-nation piece about England, but the play is suffused with a premonition of the totality of the outcome. His disenchantment with democracy would lead him in the decades after *Heartbreak* to fall for one charismatic nutter after another—Lenin, Mussolini, Sir Oswald Mosley, Hitler, Stalin; his observations on Soviet terror and the Holocaust are boggling in their heartlessness and frivolity. But none of that detracts from the eerie way he understood what was at stake as he wrote this half-earnest, half-satirical piece in those first months of the war.

That said, *Heartbreak House*, from its explicitly Chekhovian origins (a transplanted *Cherry Orchard*) to its incendiary finale, offers all kinds of other diversions for directors. Shaw's stage directions call for a set that's part drawing room, part ship's poop. The play's dominant figure is a retired seadog, Captain Shotover, and his country house is a metaphor for the ship of state—comfortable but completely adrift. But you don't want to go, so to speak, overboard. A couple of years ago in Britain, I saw a Chichester Festival production whose set boasted a mast and gangplanks running from stage to stalls. "Symbolism ahoy!" bellowed a hearty theatergoer as we made our way in. And surely the point of Shaw's metaphor is that there are no gangplanks, no moorings, no safe harbor in sight.

On the other hand, the Pearl's somewhat sparely furnished production, designed by Beowulf Boritt, substitutes its own bargain-basement idiocies, like the huge Union flag in which the set is draped. Presumably it's supposed to underline the playwright's larger theme for the benefit of an American audience, but it's tonally wrong: the British ruling class have never been great flag flyers, and to shove it in an audience's face is to misunderstand the nature of British identity. The proper place for the Union Jack is on Austin Powers's nylon briefs.

The set's deficiencies are a shame, because Gus Kaikkonen's production is otherwise very clear-eyed about this messy play's power to speak to a modern audience. The nonagenarian Captain Shotover is a sort of Learing self-portrait by the author, and George Morfogen captures both the character's Shavian eloquence and the underlying sadness. The ladies' roles can easily dwindle into stock types—the snobbish Lady Utterwood, the bohemian Mrs. Hushabye, the ingénue Ellie—but, as played by Robin Leslie Brown, Joanne Camp, and Rachel Botchan respectively, they seem freighted by impending obsolescence, almost as if they're aware that the old roles and the old wiles won't play in a post-war world with a pronounced lack of eligible suitors. On this, too, Shaw was prescient. We seem at times to be watching a West End playwright kissing off his own genre, raging against its own limitations.

Perhaps the surest evidence of that is Shaw's finale. The play is more dependent than any other he'd written on sound effects—almost as if, writing in the Woolfs' garden and hearing the gunfire from France,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

he decided to incorporate the disruption into the dramatic structure. "Stand by all hands for judgment!," says Captain Shotover in response to alarums off. "It is the hand of God!" In 1921, the first-night critics were unimpressed by the fireworks, adopting a tone of patrician disdain most reviewers reserve for the roller skaters in *Starlight Express*. "Does he expect (I cannot help writing as though I were shouting at him) us to be amused by this tomfoolery?," scoffed Desmond MacCarthy in *The New Statesman*. To James Agate, the incendiary curtain was "monstrous," if not merely "a device for waking the audience up." *The Sunday Times*'s Sydney Carroll was closer when he observed, "The piece did not seem concludable otherwise." This is what Kaikkonen's production suggests—that Shaw is, in essence, acknowledging the inadequacy of his form, that, in the unprecedented scale of what confronted him in 1916, the world had reached a point where words fail, where all the wit and insight of intellectual debate can be evaporated in one explosive instant.

This, too, seems relevant in our strange new world. Even the clunkier lines—"a soul is a very expensive thing to keep—much more than a motor car"—seen forgivable in the context of an up-ended society where urbane banter is no longer enough. *Heartbreak House* exists in two worlds, summed up by its title: there's the house—the smart West End comedy—and the heartbreak—the brooding parable driven by Shaw's own despair. American directors, in the most recent revivals, have chosen to play up the first in the hope that the second will just go away. I would assume this is a commercial calculation, derived from the fact that Shaw, to most people, means *My Fair Lady*. But it's a calculation that can never work. If you try to play *Heartbreak House* for the wit and charm, it feels hollow and bitter. Kaikkonen walks the line much more surefootedly. The Misses Camp and Brown are stylish and amusing, and their élan makes the finale all the more powerful.

Before 9/11, many directors credited Shaw with a more generalized apocalyptic vision—that, in the menace of the Zeppelin overhead, the playwright had managed to foresee the more comprehensive terrors of the nuclear age. Ah-ha, they say, couple Shotover's misanthrope with the pile of dynamite he's sitting on, and it's obvious what Shaw's really going on about. That was, more or less, the subtext of Trevor Nunn's London production a decade ago. Even in 1992, Nunn's staging—very starry, with Paul Scofield, Vanessa Redgrave, Daniel Massey—had a faintly musty feel. The alleged nuclear sensibility of the western world—its urge to lob warheads at the enemy until there's nothing to left to fight over but a toxic desert—is not the temper of Shaw's play. He's concerned with something more debilitating: a society too settled, too self-absorbed to rouse itself. "The captain is in his bunk drinking oiled ditchwater, and the crew is gambling in the forecastle," roars Shotover. "She will strike and sink and split. Do you think God's laws will be suspended in favor of England because you were born in it?" That's a wonderful line, and a direct challenge to the enfeebled state of much of the western world today in the face of a new enemy: do you think God's laws will be suspended in favor of America—or Canada, or France, or Germany—because you were born in it? In the end, the Zeppelins come and the effete poseur Hector orders the house to be lit up and, even after the explosions, the ladies hope the airships and the bombs will return, and destroy what's left. In this England, says Shaw, the elite have a death wish. Ring any bells? You can argue other interpretations of this awkward, rambling play, but in a cheap and cheerful production Gus Kaikkonen has homed in on those ideas that speak to today.

Shaw was sixty when he started work on *Heartbreak House*. He'd seen a good deal of the world, and he did not look at it narrowly. If you want his view as an *Irishman* on the Great War, the quickest way is to pull *O'Flaherty, VC* off the bookshelf and turn to

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

the preface. This play was written just before *Heartbreak House* and its title is another adroit distillation: "V.C." is the Victoria Cross, and the reference is to those Irishmen who fought gallantly for a King and Country they did not believe in. (Many southern Irishmen also volunteered for the Second World War, but by then they were part of the Irish Free State, the only British Dominion to remain neutral in the struggle against the Nazis. The Free State was a very different country from the Ireland of 1914, and the signature image of that second conflict is not the brave Irishmen who journeyed to Ulster and England to enlist but Eamonn De Valera going to the German Embassy to sign the book of condolences after Hitler's death. Even Chirac won't be doing that with Saddam.)

If this piece is, as described, "a recruiting poster in disguise," Shaw is scathing of the Government's recruiting posters proper, such as "Remember Belgium," with which the walls of Dublin Castle were plastered—His Majesty's guarantees to that country being the formal trigger for British entry into the war. The author is not persuaded:

> The folly of asking an Irishman to remember anything when asking him to fight for England was apparent to everyone outside the Castle. . . . Remembering Belgium and its broken treaty led Irishmen to remember Limerick and its broken treaty; and the recruiting ended in a rebellion, in suppressing which the British artillery quite unnecessarily reduced the centre of Dublin to ruins, and the British commanders killed their leading prisoners of war in cold blood morning after morning with an effect of long-drawn-out ferocity. Really it was only the usual childish petulance in which John Bull does things in a week that disgrace him for a century, though he soon recovers his good humour, and cannot understand why the survivors of his wrath do not feel as jolly with him as he does with them.

So much for England. Now for the Irish. Shaw continues:

> I knew from my personal experience and observation, ... that all an Irishman's hopes and ambitions turn on his opportunities of getting out of Ireland. Stimulate his loyalty, and he will stay in Ireland and die for her. . . . Appeal to his discontent, his deadly boredom, his thwarted curiosity and desire for change and adventure, and, to escape from Ireland, he will go abroad to risk his life for France, for the Papal States, for secession in America, and even, if no better may be, for England. . . .
>
> There was another consideration. . . . No one will ever know how many men joined the army in 1914 and 1915 to escape from tyrants and taskmasters, termagants and shrews, none of whom are any the less irksome when they happen by ill-luck to be also our fathers, our mothers, our wives and our children. Even at their amiablest, a holiday from them may be a tempting change for all parties. That is why I did not endow O'Flaherty, V.C. with an ideal Irish colleen for his sweetheart, and gave him for his mother a Volumnia of the potato patch rather than an affectionate parent from whom he could not so easily have torn himself away.

Lovely stuff. In a couple of paragraphs, Shaw has skewered both of John Bull's islands. I thought of *O'Flaherty, VC* a lot during Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme*, lavishly staged at Lincoln Center's Newhouse Theatre in a production that would fund a dozen Pearl Theatre Shaw revivals. This is the belated New York premiere of a play that London saw in 1985 and which has been much revived since. McGuinness has taken a date that still resonates in Northern Irish history—July 1, 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, in which the Ulster Division was slaughtered. So were many others, but July 1 is also the anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690, when King Billy's boys defeated the Papist James II. Thus, for the Ulster Protestant, past and present combined: two blood sacrifices co-mingled.

This is one of those moments that should make a brilliant play. As Churchill put it in

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

1922, despairing of the Irish and their intractably provincial concerns:

> Then came the Great War: Every institution, almost, in the world was strained. Great Empires have been overturned. The whole map of Europe has been changed. The position of countries has been violently altered. The modes of thought of men, the whole outlook on affairs, the grouping of parties, all have encountered violent and tremendous changes in the deluge of the world.
>
> But as the deluge subsides and the waters fall short, we see the dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone emerging once again. The integrity of their quarrel is one of the few institutions that has been unaltered in the cataclysm which has swept the world.

But who can blame the Irish for clinging to the "integrity of their quarrel" when, even in the midst of the great sweeping cataclysm, fate finds a way to bind them anew to the past? Once you've stumbled on the idea, you'd think it hardly possible to go wrong, but McGuinness does, badly, and not all Nicholas Martin's skilful staging can obscure the shallowness and provincialism of the playwright's take on history. In this play we follow the fortunes of eight Ulstermen, from the enthusiasm of enlistment to the disillusion of the trenches—or, as Lincoln Center's press guys put it, from "simple-minded glory mongers to spiritually anguished realists." Does that sound familiar? Does it not, indeed, sound like every war movie you've ever seen? But McGuinness is Irish, and for him Irishness is all. If you're Oirish, come into the playhouse, take all the clichés you can find and dunk 'em in an industrial strength version of McDonald's famous Shamrock Shakes.

The platoon that's a carefully selected assortment of stock types? Got it. The lone survivor? Check. The toff who doesn't fit in with the working-class boys? You bet. Go back to Shaw's preface to *O'Flaherty, VC*: he knows the clichés and he knows how to avoid them. McGuinness seems incapable of thinking beyond, and his one variation on the formula is almost laughably meretricious: instead of the romance with the "ideal Irish colleen," we have two gay guys.

Meanwhile, the affairs of the world are barely mentioned, and McGuinness even manages to blow the bloody, primal link to King Billy's great victory by crassly inserting a scene in which the lads re-enact the Battle of the Boyne as a sort of pre-Somme warm-up exercise. What a comprehensive botch job this play is. McGuinness is a nationalist Catholic and, though the Ulster Protestants must take their share of the blame for their status as the Ethnic Group Most Unloved by Western Progressives with the Exception of Afrikaaners and White Rhodesians, one can't but feel the author hasn't exactly gone to a lot of trouble to tap into their mindset. Their conversation is relentlessly blinkered: they're fighting not to defeat the Germans but to save Ulster from the Fenians. That may be how some thought, but Ulstermen settled across the globe in service of the Empire, and they weren't all sunk in the bog of strictly local obsessions. His antipathy may arise from the period in which the play was written—the early Eighties, when "peace" in Northern Ireland seemed further away than ever and the memory of Bobby Sands and the other dead hunger strikers was still fresh in nationalist minds. Seeing *Observe* again after some years, I was struck by how anachronistic it seemed—1916 as filtered through 1985.

In a talented ensemble, Rod MacLachlan stands out: the pillar of strength to a mate on the verge of crack-up, he then cracks up himself. But, even as you're moved by the breakdown, it doesn't feel organic. McGuinness has swiped a very particular historical episode and shoehorned it into the conventions of generic war drama. What a withered shrunken horizon the contemporary Irish dramatist prowls. And don't get me started on Conor McPherson's *Dublin Carol* at the Atlantic.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Art

"Manet/Velázquez" at the Met

by Karen Wilkin

Was it happenstance, luck, or careful planning that brought two exhibitions linking French and Spanish masters to New York at just about the same time this winter? Whether it was by chance or design that "Matisse Picasso" at MOMA QNS was scheduled to coincide with "Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting" at the Metropolitan,[1] we must be grateful. Individually, each exhibition is, of course, completely self-sufficient and spectacular in its own way. But together, they become an intensive seminar in what could be called "the grand unified theory of art history": a thought-provoking progression from the macrocosm of national and period style, at the Met, to the microcosm of the relationship between two remarkable artists, at MOMA, a journey from the broad and verifiable to the sharply focused but ultimately elusive and speculative. (Let's ignore the various notions of parity and dependence encapsulated by the different punctuation of the two titles.) Together the two shows raise countless questions about the history of taste, about how works of art are perceived, about conscious and unconscious choices, about "the anxiety of influence," and more. What is most exciting, both "Matisse Picasso" and "Manet/Velázquez" address these deeply engaging points not by theorizing, but by presenting a simply staggering array of wonderful pictures. In both shows, discreet wall texts and labels supply essential facts and dates about who might have seen what, where, and when; those at the Met are especially helpful in clarifying the arcana of historical background. For even richer detail, both "Matisse Picasso" and "Manet/Velázquez" are accompanied by catalogues full of thought-provoking essays, and a wealth of information on provenances, exhibition histories, and the like, handsomely presented. Readers should be warned, however, that the catalogue of "Manet/Velázquez" is, to say the least, challenging to navigate, relying as it does on a numerical code system to correlate the plates embedded in the essays with the entries, which are in a separate section divided into alphabetical subsets determined by nationality. (The book's combination of related, but essentially independent essays, copious illustrations, and intertwined facts must have posed extraordinary challenges to organization, but until the code reveals itself—which it doesn't until the entries are tackled—finding specific images is a daunting task.)

1 "Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Painting" opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on March 4 and remains on view until June 8, 2003. The exhibition was previously on view at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, from September 16, 2002 to January 12, 2003. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Gary Tinterow, has been published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and is distributed by Yale University Press (600 pages, $75).

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

While the two overlapping exhibitions complement each other nicely, they are nonetheless very different in conception. "Matisse Picasso" is an intimate show, an opportunity to follow closely the visible manifestations of an oblique, rather private dialogue—sometimes more amicable, sometimes less—between two phenomenally gifted individuals who were near-coevals, colleagues, competitors, and ultimately friends. "Manet/Velázquez," despite the *mano a mano* implications of the title, focuses not on a single pair of painters, but rather offers a sweeping panorama that encompasses several generations of artists, spans several centuries, and transcends the limitations of place. The show is a fascinating, wide-ranging examination of a crucial transformation in taste, a study of how Spanish painting, which was mainly ignored by the French until well into the nineteenth century, became an admired model for French painters, an antidote to the Academy-sanctioned worship of Raphael and his legacy of chilly Neo-Classicism. As one of the show's curators, the Metropolitan's Gary Tinterow, describes it, "Manet/Velázquez" probes a dramatic shift in the paradigm of painting "from Idealism to Realism, from Italy to Spain, from Renaissance to Baroque, from carefully finished, porcelain-like surfaces to . . . brushy technique." Since the ramifications of that shift can briefly be summarized as the advent of modernism—think about the Impressionists' cultivation of the appearance of spontaneity in their efforts to evoke modern life or, more to the point, think about Manet as the first modernist—it's not an overstatement to say that a visit to "Manet/Velázquez" is essential preparation for seeing the exhibition at MOMA. In a very real sense, neither Matisse nor Picasso might have been the Matisse or Picasso we revere if the subtle revolution in standards traced by "Manet/Velázquez" had not taken place.

An appreciation for Spanish painting came late to France. Until the nineteenth century, few works by Spanish masters had entered French collections. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in fact, official opinion held that there were no Spanish masters, finding them wanting for many of the same reasons that Caravaggio was criticized by his high-minded contemporaries. Apparently unable to interpret an acute sensitivity to tone, texture, and tactile mass as anything but a quest for verisimilitude, the most elevated taste of the period declared that "merely" imitating nature was an unworthy undertaking; a properly trained artist's task was to invent an improved, geometrically ordered version of the perceivable world based on ideal concepts of form derived from the antique. (It's worth remembering that this was an era when musicians were supposed to compose not by trying things out on an instrument but by applying theoretical principles of harmony.) By the first part of the nineteenth century, however, French enthusiasm for Spanish painting ran so high that during Napoleon's occupation of Spain, Joseph Bonaparte rewarded his generals for their successful campaign with paintings from the royal collections. One of these in particular, the notably astute connoisseur Marshal Soult, took full advantage of the opportunity and shipped home to Paris an astounding number of works by such Spanish masters as Zurbarán, Ribera, Murillo, and Velázquez, along with paintings by Titian and Van Dyke. After Wellington defeated the French and Spanish autonomy was restored, looted Spanish art in French museums was returned, with a good deal of ostentation, to the collections from which it had been taken, but numbers of privately held works, such as the nearly two hundred pictures Soult had carried off, remained in France. This remarkable collection, which was visited by many artists and writers between 1812 and Soult's death in 1851, helped to nourish the growing appetite for the previously underrated Spanish school.

Further sustenance was provided in 1838, when Louis-Philippe inaugurated the Galérie Espagnole at the Louvre. On display was the Hispanophile king's personal

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

collection of four hundred works believed to be by Spanish masters, acquired during the turmoil that followed the death of the post-Napoleonic Spanish king, Ferdinand VII, in 1833; in the wake of these political upheavals and the suppression of religious orders, major works from monasteries, convents, and private collections had become available for sale and export, much to the benefit of the constitutional monarch's acquisitive instincts. When the Galérie Espagnole closed at the end of Louis-Philippe's reign in 1848, the absence of Spanish painting at the Louvre was so keenly felt that aggressive efforts were made to acquire the most important works available at the time. A Murillo of the Immaculate Conception was purchased in 1852 from Marshal Soult's estate (at a higher price than the museum had ever before paid for a painting) and throughout the 1860s, the Spanish collection of the French state continued to grow. During these years, too, a visit to the royal museum later known as the Prado became as essential for an aspiring artist as a sojourn in Rome had been for an eighteenth-century practitioner, not only because of the fine Titians that could be seen in Madrid, but also because of the works on view by artists such as Murillo and Velázquez. By the middle of the nineteenth century, admiration for Spanish painting had increased to the point where an ambitious exhibition of Old Master painting, held in Manchester, England—which was visited by many French artists—included nearly a hundred works by the Spanish school, a third of them by Murillo and almost a third by Velázquez.

At the Met, "Manet/Velázquez" brings this complicated history to life with an impressive selection of Spanish pictures that had a particular effect on French artists, including, among an ample group of Murillos, that notoriously expensive *Immaculate Conception* (*c.* 1678, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), purchased by the Louvre from the Soult collection, and repatriated to Spain in 1940. There's a stunning array of important, frequently iconic works by Zurbarán, Ribera, Goya, and Velázquez, some less familiar ones, and, occasionally, efforts by lesser lights. All of this resonates, in different ways, in an equally impressive selection of works by forward-looking French artists who looked attentively at the work of their Spanish ancestors: Corot, Courbet, Delacroix, and Degas, among others, and especially Manet.

A number of pictures whose attributions have been notably changed by modern scholarship are called upon to provide hints of how mid-nineteenth-century audiences saw the Spanish paintings they so eagerly sought. Among them are a strangely bodiless Magdalen and a grisly close-up of Cato's suicide, both (it seems likely) formerly displayed in the Galérie Espagnole as Riberas. Today, they are assigned to Ribera's student and assistant, the Italian virtuoso Luca Giordano, known in his day because of his painting speed as Luca *fa' presto*. Since the two artists worked closely together, it's not uncommon for Giordano's work to be mistaken for that of his teacher. What makes the early nineteenth-century attribution of the pictures in question particularly interesting is their having been on view in the Galérie Espagnole. Although Ribera was Spanish-born and known as "Lo Spagnaletto," he spent most of his career in Naples. Because of this, he was traditionally considered in the context of Italian painters and admired as one of the most accomplished of the Caravaggeschi. Clearly, Ribera's "repatriation" in the nineteenth century was triggered by a change in desiderata—further evidence that, by then, Spanish old masters were beginning to command as much, or perhaps even more, attention than some of their Italian counterparts.

A pallid and fiercely foreshortened *Dead Soldier* (National Gallery, London) is included for similar reasons. Plainly the source of Manet's *Dead Toreador* (1863–1864, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), it was once thought to be a Velázquez, but is now described generically as "seven-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

teenth-century Italian." Manet's belief that the picture was by Velázquez, whom he admired extravagantly, may explain his faithful reiteration of the pose of *Dead Soldier*, with only minor adjustments; he was, however, willing to take more liberties with other aspects of the picture, displacing and modernizing the seventeenth-century picture's expressive contrast between warm darkness and livid flesh—a contrast that, along with the dramatic pose, carries the narrative—into an even more extreme, but also more abstract, tonal jump between notes of radiant pink—the bullfighter's sash, stockings, jacket facings, and cape—and the minimally inflected, almost undifferentiated black-brown surroundings. When Manet's picture was in its original, uncropped format, which included, as background, the bull ring, this vague, Velázquez-inspired swath of luminous dark seems to have been a more naturalistically lit stretch of sand, but even then, it was never as anecdotal as the sketchily indicated landscape of the Spanish picture.

The Met's problematic but appealing *Majas on a Balcony* (*c.* 1812–1835) also falls in this category. Long believed to be a Goya, it has also long had its authorship repeatedly questioned on aesthetic grounds, although its documented history can apparently be interpreted either to reinforce or cast doubt on the attribution. Some years ago, the Met exhibited *Majas on a Balcony* beside an impeccable, universally accepted, vigorously painted Goya of the same subject, from a private Spanish collection. At the time, this confrontation seemed to justify a definitive if reluctant downgrading of the Met's picture, which seemed static and a little flat beside its seldom-seen relative, but in the current show it is identified, cautiously, as "attributed to Goya." For Manet, the picture was unquestionably a Goya; it was reproduced in an important monograph on the artist published in the 1860s and exhibited in the Galérie Espagnole, where he may have seen it as a teenager. Manet's *Balcony* (1868–1869, Musée d'Orsay, Paris), that miracle of black, brushy white, and unpredictable blue-greens—and an essential lick of mauve-blue hydrangea—is obviously, among other things, an overt homage to a Spanish painter he deeply admired. (As a Goya, *Majas on a Balcony* also became the source of a vigorous early stain painting by the young Helen Frankenthaler, but that's another matter.) To emphasize Manet's fascination with Goya, the installation at the Met also includes *The Execution of Emperor Maximilian* (1867, Boston Museum of Fine Arts), one of the French painter's repeated attempts to rid himself of his obsession with Goya's pitiless indictment of Napoleonic brutality, *The Third of May*, with its firing squad and spot-lit, transfixed peasants. A group of Manet's lively, Goya-inspired prints reinforces the point.

The show underlines such connections, with marvelous effect. We all know about Manet's enthusiasm for Spanish painting. He himself was never shy about proclaiming it—he even declared his debt to Velázquez explicitly by including a print of *Los Borrachos* in the background of his portrait of Zola, along with a Japanese print and an image of his own *Olympia*—but it is both exhilarating and instructive to have an opportunity for first-hand comparisons. Although such side-by-side pairings are uncommon in the show, we are presented with just such an opportunity at the outset. Velázquez's full length, standing portrait of *The Jester Pablo de Valladolid* (*c.* 1632–1635, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), which Manet described in a letter to Fantin-Latour as "possibly the most extraordinary piece of painting that has ever been done," is set beside Manet's portrait of the actor Rouvière as Hamlet. It's an eye-testing confrontation, a kind of warm-up exercise for looking at the rest of the show. The strangely awkward Manet portrait seems to suffer at first, but improves with closer attention. The painter more than redeems himself later on, when, after a spectacular selection of Spanish pictures that, apart from their own considerable merits, also are a textbook demonstration of Tinterow's "new para-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

digm," we discover a room of Manet's narrow, vertical canvases of standing figures, painted in the mid-1860s. As a group, these broadly painted models dressed as beggars and actors in dark "Elizabethan" costume make plain how enthralled Manet was by the way Velázquez managed to carve out a space for Valladolid, simply through placement, subtle tonal shifts, and a cast shadow. They reveal how fascinated Manet was by the apparent contradiction between the matte, black, flatness of the jester's cloak and the unignorable physicality of the painted figure. And they reveal his eventual successful assimilation and translation of these characteristics into his own pictorial language.

That success is made clear when we see Velázquez's poignant image of *The Dwarf Don Diego de Acedo, "El Primo"* (*c.* 1636–1638, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid), only a few galleries away from one of Manet's most direct responses to this ravishing picture, his portrait of *Emile Zola* (1868, Musée d'Orsay). Don Diego, introspective, relaxed, with a resigned, intelligent face and an elegant black-on-black suit, turns the pages of an enormous book, as he sits comfortably against a roughly indicated gray landscape; the picture is dominated by the clash of the insistently white, massively geometric book and the subtly varied blacks and rounded shapes of the dwarf's hat and clothing, distracting us from his disproportionate body and forcing us to concentrate on the sensitively painted head. When, after this encounter, we come across Manet's portrait of his friend, we note in a new way Zola's three-quarter pose, his absorbed expression, and above all, the opposition of his inky-black jacket and the chalky, spread pages of his open book.

Stimulating as such specific comparisons are, the true strength of "Manet/Velázquez" lies in the way the show illuminates larger ideas of what French artists learned, more generally, from their Spanish ancestors. Most fundamental was the Spaniards' unflinching realism: their manifest enjoyment of the textures of homespun and brocade, earthenware and armor, as revealed by washes of light, along with their simultaneous celebration of the beautiful, the ordinary, and the grotesque, and a lot in between. Even more important, though, was the Spanish painters' ability—most powerfully demonstrated by Velázquez and Goya—to suggest these particulars without compromising a sense of the materiality of paint. Added to this was the intense fervor of the religious paintings of Zurbarán and Ribera, the fantasy and ferocity of Goya. At the Met, we can trace the varied responses of several generations of French artists to the wealth of fresh possibilities suggested by the Spaniards. Courbet's insistence that his only teacher was nature seems more self-serving than ever, in this context; Constantin Guys's fresh studies of "modern life" suddenly reveal their indebtedness to Goya, and we begin to think about certain pictures by Degas and Renoir in new, unexpected ways. A section devoted to Delacroix's early relationship to Spanish painting is almost a show-within-a-show. It includes an edifying selection ranging from a careful copy of a female saint thought, at the time, to be a Zurbarán, to canvases inspired by Goya and lively studies after *Los Caprichos*. Delacroix's first-hand acquaintance with Goya's work, it turns out, was both profound and precocious. His godfather was ambassador to Spain, had his portrait painted by Goya, and brought several works by the artist from Spain, quite possibly including a copy of *Los Caprichos*, when he returned to France in 1800; the young Delacroix, who frequented his godfather's house and was close to his children, had many opportunities to see his collection.

Yet the exhibition makes plain that it was Manet who was not only the most apt French pupil of the Spanish school, but also the one who transformed the implications of their work most completely into a potent new notion of what a picture could be. A glorious selection of his work—glorious even in relation to the Met's own notable holdings—allows us to follow Manet

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

through the 1860s, as he strove to assimilate what he found so powerful and seductive in the Spaniards. It's clear that he responded most strongly to the formal implications of their work, beyond most other considerations. The bullfighter costume pieces, the dead matador, and the still life of the basket of Spanish props that became the emblem of his studio notwithstanding, Manet was less interested in the accoutrements of Spanishness than in more fundamental notions of how to construct a picture. That he quoted poses and compositional ideas from Spanish paintings, throughout the 1860s, is not necessarily significant, since he used Italian sources in similar ways. (That he allowed those quotations to remain evident is probably more noteworthy; it can be interpreted as part of Manet's modernism, not as "appropriation" *avant la lettre*, but as yet another way of revealing the raw materials of art making.)

Manet seems to have had, from the start, a touch equivalent to the immediacy and transparency of the Spanish painters he admired; other things, as we can see in the portrait of Rouvière as Hamlet, he had to work at. But he achieved his goals. We watch him aspire to the economy and clarity of—say—Zurbarán's rock-hard *Saint Francis in Meditation* (*c.* 1635–1640, National Gallery, London), formerly hung in the Galérie Espagnole and easily the painter's most celebrated work in Manet's day, and see how well he succeeded in his Zurbarán-homage, *Monk at Prayer* (*c.* 1864–1865, Boston Museum of Fine Arts). We follow Manet testing the possibilities of drenching light as a means of revealing form and clarifying planes, or probing the limits of tonal contrast as a potent vehicle of expression. We see him struggle to make black as gorgeous, as implacable, and as pictorially essential as Velázquez does. And more. And soon, when we return to the Spanish painters, educated by what Manet emphasizes and suppresses, we begin to have the illusion that we are seeing them freshly, through Manet's eyes.

Last fall, I found myself so envious of friends lucky enough to have seen the French version of "Manet/Velázquez" at the Musée d'Orsay, the joint organizer of the show, that I made several unsuccessful attempts to add a detour to Paris to other working trips. Now there is no reason to be envious, in spite of the usual number of tantalizing "Paris only" works listed in the catalogue. The New York version of "Manet/Velázquez" includes a brilliant coda, a choice gathering of works by American painters, mostly of a slightly later generation than Manet, that demonstrates their reactions to a double dose of the ideas under review in the main portion of the exhibition. These artists not only responded to Spanish painting with the same enthusiasm and perceptiveness as their French counterparts, but in addition, they looked closely at how their French counterparts had interpreted what they had learned from the Spanish. Mary Cassatt, for example, appears to have been instructed equally by the examples of Goya and her friend, Degas. A sampling of James McNeill Whistler's standing male portraits bears witness to his study of both Velázquez's isolated figures, in their ambiguous paint-space, and Manet's emulations of those prototypes; the palette of Whistler's *Arrangement in Flesh Color and Black: Theodore Duret* (1883–1884, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), with its silvery background and pale apricot cloak, suggests the French disciple as much as the Spanish master, although the slash of cadmium orange is entirely Whistler's own. A sober, self-contained Thomas Eakins of his brother-in-law—equally strong as portrait and as painting—takes on new layers of association in this context, as does his uncharacteristically louche portrait of an actress, which acquires an uncanny (and possibly unsuitable) connection with Velázquez's well-known portrait of Pope Innocent X. Like Manet, both of these painters seem to have absorbed the fundamental formal lessons of "Spanishness," in contrast to their compatriot and coeval, William Merritt Chase. Chase, an enor-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

mously accomplished, successful, and often impressive painter, obviously admired Velázquez's standing portraits as much as anyone and seems to have learned a good deal from them about how to dispose a vertical figure against a narrow canvas. Yet the pictures at the Met suggest that, in practice, Chase relied more on props and costumes to conjure up associations with Spanish art than on painterly strategies—a sort of nineteenth-century American "Iberianism."

John Singer Sargent, not surprisingly, steals this section of the show. Of course, it's impossible not to be bowled over by him, given a selection that includes *Madame X* (1883–1884, Metropolitan Museum of Art), with her racy decolletage, *Dr. Pozzi at Home* (1881, UCLA Hammer Museum, Los Angeles), in his chic red dressing gown, and—what I am convinced is Sargent's finest work—*The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit* (1882, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), in their white pinafores, in a dim interior dominated by an enormous blue and white vase. Just how much Sargent owed to Spanish painting is made perfectly clear by the presence of some of his studies after Velázquez, including a virtuoso little copy of *Las Meninas*, painted only a year or so before he began the geometrically lucid, tonally rich painting of the Boit children.

My ideal day, over the next few months, would be to spend the morning at the Met with "Manet/Velázquez" and the afternoon at MOMA with "Matisse Picasso," followed by one of the essays in either of the handsome, scrupulously researched catalogues that accompany the shows. On second thought, both shows are so meaty and require such intense looking that I'd better do this on consecutive days. And while I'm at it, I should do some research on the suggestive resemblance between that odd Manet, *Woman at Her Window, Also Called Angelina* (*c.* 1860–1864, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) at the Met, and that equally odd Picasso Blue Period half-length female figure, *Celestina* (1903, private collection), now at MOMA. It may be pure coincidence, but the Manet was on view in the Luxembourg when Picasso was first in Paris. Another case of cross-fertilization, across generations, between French and Spanish painters, this time in reverse?

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

The art world has traded the name of William Bailey as a hushed code word for thirty years. A code word for what? Well, for the legitimacy of painting, for realism, for the return of the nude, for an indifference to the art of the moment. A professor and dean in fine arts at Yale, one who spends part of each year in Umbria, Bailey is that rare find in the criticism of modern art: a *test case.*

To his champions, Bailey has achieved the feat of rendering what is ordinary and known—through the conventional media of oil on canvas and pencil on paper—in ways that are strange and oddly new. To his critics, and this includes most of the art world's trendier lot, he is a hopelessly retrograde realist, a painter of the lowest sort, whose narrow subject matter of young ladies and tables of crockery is a passive-aggressive assault on the legacy of the avant-garde.

Yet the frustration that Bailey has posed to art's (now) establishment tastes in the avant-garde would have little purchase were it not for his work's remarkable—and really unexplainable I have to say—visual presence and formulation. A recent exhibition at Robert Miller Gallery testifies to the fact that this painter deserves a chapter of his own in the history of modernism.[1]

In his meditations on the themes of still life and nude, Bailey draws from an inheritance of Ingres and Gérôme, but also from the Renaissance modeling of form, a monastic, earthtoned palette, a hint of Greuze's "erotic prudery," and an air of genuine surreal strangeness—de Chirico-esque. More than the sum of their parts, timeless more than timely, Bailey's paintings *do* test your understanding of what is acceptable for modern art—yes, and that's a very good thing. His work is a feast for the eyes, albeit a low cholesterol one. You leave in need of a second helping.

Many painters are called "masters of light," but Bailey is something else: a master of tone. His still life paintings that lined the main gallery at Robert Miller—a varying combination of bottles, jugs, pitchers, kettles, funnels, and eggs with evocative titles like *Monte Rotondo* (2001), *Migianella Monumentale* (2002), and *Terranuova* (2002)—are drawn in that half-light of a shaded room. The effect undermines color but, through the absence of light's bright reflection, can elucidate shape. Free of imperfections, these shapes are what some critics have called "ideas" and others "ideal," and their message communicates a placid, Apollonian harmony—a harmony of the spheres, maybe? While the crockery and eggs are objects from the real world, there is no indication that they have remained here; the dark spaces above them hang like sepulchral shade. Whether these vessels now contain

1 "William Bailey" was on view at Robert Miller Gallery, New York, from February 6 to March 15, 2003.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

anything, or contained something at one time, or have any kind of history whatsoever we are never told. There is a strange timelessness and weightlessness to them, a tapping into some forgotten notion, volumes without mass that levitate above the table surfaces just enough for us to sense it without really seeing it. Perhaps this hints at the power of Bailey's still lifes—we get out of them what *we* bring to the table.

The combination of these still lifes alongside paintings of Bailey's other major theme, the nude, made for arresting dialogue at Robert Miller. Bailey's nudes resemble his idealized still lives in certain ways—the soft handling of tone across the arc of the skin, the lack of definition. In the east gallery room, where a series of tempera and charcoal drafts hung beside the finished nude of *Imaginary Studio* (2002), one could see the smoothing out of uniqueness in the face and the straightening of curls through Bailey's works-in-process. The message these nudes convey is not one of sexiness in the guise of an odalisque, or the morning-after shame one finds in Whistler, or the prurient infantilization of a Balthus. Yet there is not a sense of complete propriety or purposefulness in our gaze, either. In the eggs and vessels of his still lives and wombs of these nudes, Bailey extends the possibility of reproduction if not an explicit image of reproduction itself. Reproduction of what? Of some unknown history. Of the painterly past, maybe, in the eggs (tempera) and funnels (oils) of those still lives.

Bailey's paintings seem pretty pacific, yes. So it must be a sign of the times in intellectual culture that *The New Yorker* chooses to hurl as much venom as it did in its recent blurb:

> Many hermetic still-lifes, plus vaguely Balthusian nudes of young women, by the arch-conservative realist, whose changeless style is an earnest of metaphysical conviction and/or paralysis. He renders shelves and tabletops of old-fashioned ceramic and metal vessels with slightly fuzzed precision in finely adjusted grays and earthen colors with decorative blue accents. Bailey's obsessively scrutinized vessels have more sensuous presence—sexiness, even—than his phlegmatic nudes, which isn't to say that they have much. Time stands still. Calendar art for people who don't care what year it is.

Subtlety is not for everyone, and a subtle painter can be the most infuriating thing of all.

Subtle the painter Paul Georges was not. Through his life he struggled to paint the world bigger, brighter, and crazier: bigger canvases, larger studios, louder colors, broader brushstrokes, wilder images. The show "Paul Georges: Last Paintings" at Salander-O'Reilly is so titled not only because this artist, with a big appetite for life, died in May 2002, but also because he called his last body of work "My Posthumous Series."[2] By some premonition or foresight, Georges knew his clock was running out. His final series, big and hastily executed, with one canvas so large it would not fit in the Salander gallery space, depicts a host of heavenly creatures gazing in at the artist through the skylight of his studio. And these creatures *are* heavenly: flesh-and-blood nudes floating down from that studio in the sky. The effect is touching—and it raises that question of art's age-old theme: immortality. For in his final year Georges was building both a bridge into the afterlife of his soul as well as the afterlife of his artistic reputation. These paintings were his Giza.

In life Georges was part of a circle of New York painters, including Fairfield Porter, Leland Bell, Paul Resika, and Robert De Niro, that often matched a renewed interest in the figure with a Fauvist sensitivity to color and light. Georges's best works in "Last Paintings" are those where he has sublimated gesture for the clashing effects of broad fields of color. *Painting in the*

2 "Paul Georges: Last Paintings" was on view at Salander-O'Reilly Galleries from March 4 to March 29, 2003.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Studio (2001), where the artist stands by an open window awash in cadmium yellow, best captured this effect. At other moments, however, Georges cannot quite deliver. His figures are often cruder than they are bold, as in *Muses Dancing in Volcano Shadow* (2001), and, like many painters, he never seemed to get a lock on the face. He did better where color and light were able to shine forth, such as in the lush and sun-drenched *Rose Arbor* (2001) and the liquid *Still Life in Landscape* (2002–2002).

Death can be a good career move, but it's not always convenient to stick around to enjoy it. Like those eavesdropping seraphim, let's hope that Georges managed to drop in from time to time on his own achievement.

This might be a good moment to plug the Marsden Hartley survey show at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, which I reviewed here last month. There are still twenty days in April in which to catch it. Now a gallery in New York has opened a show—devoted to a small period in Hartley's output—that contributes a still richer view of this difficult, wide ranging, and truly wonderful artist.

Marsden Hartley has generally received two critical readings in the history of modernism. One: Hartley's early pictographs painted in Berlin at the outbreak of the First World War—through their use of all-over abstraction—were his most significant contributions to twentieth-century art. Two: Hartley's figural work from the 1930s and 1940s, up to the time of his death in 1943, was equal if not surpassing of his great Berlin achievements three decades before. As all-over abstraction looks more like ancient history, it would seem that the second assessment deserves renewed priority (this is the position I argued for in last month's review). What both of these histories overlook, however, in Hartley's achievement in landscape paintings in the 1920s, which is often seen as a Cézannean and Fauvist retreat from his losses in the Great War and from his potential for boldness and newness.

"Marsden Hartley: New Mexico 1918–1920," a gem of a show now at Alexandre Gallery, proves that Hartley can always surprise.[3] His molten hills and purple crags rank among the most remarkable depictions of landscape one can find. *Landscape, New Mexico* (1919–1920), on loan from the Whitney Museum, is a masterpiece. What becomes apparent as Hartley paints in series is the astonishing variety of his output. His *New Mexico Landscape* (1919) from the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum is abbreviated Cézanne; a painting of the same title from a private collection is upended Derain. These are not paintings executed through a system, but rather a reflection of something chthonic, something primitive. The catalogue includes a very worthwhile essay from Gail R. Scott, which puts much of this intense period in perspective: Since Hartley did not drive, he often went into the landscape on foot, camping out for extended periods of time, executing, he claimed, a pastel a day. In addition to Scott's contribution, the catalogue includes two essays written by the artist himself for *El Palacio*, the magazine of the Museum of New Mexico, both originally published in December 1918. These essays confirm Hartley's metaphysical intensity:

> Genuineness, authenticity, are qualities we demand of ancient objects and pictures in the museums of art anywhere in the world. We despise spuriousness in art, and very legitimately, just as we despise all forms of fakery that hint at genuineness. We have a right then to expect the same characteristics in a modern painting, authenticity of emotion.

Can there be any doubt that Marsden Hartley remains an underrated genius in twentieth-century art?

---

3 "Marsden Hartley: New Mexico 1918–1920: An American Discovering America" opened at Alexandre Gallery, New York, on March 6 and remains on view until April 19, 2003. A catalogue of the show has been published by Alexandre Gallery in association with Mark Borghi Fine Art, Inc.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The painter Wayne Thiebaud has earned *his* footnote in the survey books of twentieth-century art for his still lifes of squishy cupcakes, pies, and other devildog treats from the 1960s. His work from this period matched a rather traditional paint application, sticky and sweet, with the new idioms of Pop—serialism and kitsch under the influence of Madison Avenue and the roadside billboard. Now in his eighties, Thiebaud has been associated with the pop movement ever since his early snacks, even though he has not been its strictest hardliner, and his catalogue has come to include a broader sweep of modern life—amped-up cityscapes of San Francisco, for example.

On view at Allen Stone Gallery in March, Thiebaud's six large landscape paintings, with titles like *River Cloud* and *Fields & Furrows*, all from 2002, were inspired by California farmland. They will undoubtedly be compared to the recent landscape work of another California painter, David Hockney.[4] Both artists have chosen to tweak perspective—multiple vanishing points, uncertain horizon lines—as part of their paintings' architectural framework. Yet while Hockney leaves us with mostly representational scenes in his "Grand Canyon" series, Thiebaud makes funky perspective and composition the beginning and end of his work. His aerial views of rivers and unworldly farmland are an admixture of checkered patterns, dissolving wheatfields, and faked horizons ornamented here and there with stands of small trees in shadow. The colors are that of old rose cellophane, and one cannot help but see in his red and yellow riverbanks the ketchup and mustard of earlier work. The results are interesting if brainy and hyperactive, trying a little too hard to fool, with too much of a reminder of the paintings' pastiche and not enough of a sense of real place. The produce that grows in Thiebaud's fields is a bumper crop of ho-hos and ding-dongs that sprout solely from the Pop artist's mind. This is a pantomime of modern life.

How to describe the difference between the landscapes of Marsden Hartley and Wayne Thiebaud—between the divergent impressions these two painters leave in your mind? It can make for an interesting exercise. One answer might be the contest between Thiebaud's abstraction and Hartley's "empathy"—what Wilhelm Worringer characterized as the aesthetic engagement of a "contemplating subject."

In his 1979 book *Symbolism*, the art historian Robert Goldwater identified a similar, albeit separate, tension in the art of 1890s—between the public art of *art nouveau* and the private art of Symbolism:

> The symbolist style has an energy and simplicity which, though difficult to define, is recognizable and recognizably lacking in the more decorative productions of *art nouveau*. This force and intensity, which dictates the tensions between (in Schmutzler's words) "the qualities of material reality, such as perspective, foreshortening, volumes in light and shadow" and the internal order of art, stems ultimately from the symbolist's expressive purpose. For whether or not the artists of the movement worked out a philosophy of idealism, so that they believed they were creating symbols of unseen ideas, or more simply, believed that the properties of line and colour can express emotion, they intended their pictures to have meaning, and this conviction that art conveys personal feeling and/or universal ideas was, of course, of no concern to *art nouveau*.

Is pop art the bastard child of cool *art nouveau*? Maybe. I do sometimes wonder, however, why much art today eschews private meaning to be *so* publicly *nouveau*? Could it be time to reprioritize art's "urge to empathy"? When a Wayne Thiebaud can outprice a Marsden Hartley four-to-one, it's a buyers' market for empathy in art.

4 "Wayne Thiebaud: Riverscapes 2002" was on view at Allan Stone Gallery, New York, from February 5 to March 22, 2003, and Paul Thiebaud Gallery, San Francisco, from October 29 to December 21, 2002. The exhibition opens at Faggionato Fine Arts, London, on April 8 and remains on view until May 24, 2003.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Music

New York chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

It's not every chamber group that can sell out Carnegie Hall—and the Emerson String Quartet almost did. The Emerson is one of the finest chamber groups in the world, but it did them no harm that they had booked a guest star: the baritone Thomas Hampson, known for his remarkable voice, his cerebral manner, and his matinee-idol looks. Their program had a theme, and that theme was despair, tragedy, and death. This wasn't exactly a hootenanny. The concert was part of an Emerson String Quartet project called "Text/Subtext." Its purpose is to explore "relationships between instrumental music and narrative," as the group's promotional materials put it.

Lots of concerts have themes these days. It is close to de rigueur. There once was a time—not so long ago—when a concert didn't need a theme, and did not feel compelled to teach musicology. It was enough to present great or at least interesting music. Now, however, to do so seems almost low-class. Night after night, I go to the concert hall, and if the program doesn't have an actual, conscious, stated theme, the writer of the program notes will "unify" the performed pieces somehow, often in the most imaginative and strained ways. "The connection between this Byrd pavan and this Bolcom rag? Well, here it is!"

I maintain, however, that the presentation of great or interesting music—whether related or not—is still an honorable motivation. And, if you really want to press the case, all music is related, at some level.

In Carnegie Hall, the Emerson played the Quartet No. 1 by Smetana and then went to *Dover Beach*, Barber's small masterwork for string quartet and baritone. This piece should be the province of every American baritone, even if a German—Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau—pretty much set the standard for it. Hampson sounded magnificent, of course, but he did a lot of sliding around, giving a strange impression of soupiness. (It *is* in some way a nautical work, you might plead.) This performance did not cast a spell, either, which the best renderings of *Dover Beach* do. But it was capable, and to hear this work is always moving.

After intermission, Hampson returned with his regular accompanist, the pianist Craig Rutenberg, for three songs by Schubert. These were meant to set the scene for the composer's "Death and the Maiden" Quartet, which would be the final work on the program. (One of the songs, of course, was "Death and the Maiden.") I might comment here just on the matter of applause. At the end of the second song, Hampson held out his hand—somewhat peevishly—because he didn't want the audience to applaud. I find that, as a rule, it's better for a singer simply to give in to such applause, or at least not to object. It makes for less of a scene. When some applaud, other audience members shush—which is far uglier than any spell-breaking

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

applause (and, truthfully, often the spell is not there).

In the old days—as long as I'm waxing nostalgic in this chronicle—musicians tended to be more relaxed about applause. Arthur Rubinstein would actually get up in the middle of a concerto, if the audience applauded after a movement—he felt he should acknowledge it. A few years ago, Earl Wild performed his eighty-fifth birthday recital in Carnegie Hall. The audience applauded in a middle of a group—and, sure enough, old-school as he is, he stood to bow.

Shortly after the Emerson String Quartet and Thomas Hampson appeared, Leif Ove Andsnes—the young Norwegian pianist—gave a recital in Carnegie Hall, and he, too, held out his hand, not wanting applause between Grieg *Lyric Pieces*. Then, oddly, he did not pause for applause before heading into a couple of Debussy studies, perhaps wanting to suggest a continuity between the Grieg pieces and the Debussy pieces. That was fine for himself, if he wanted to eschew applause—but I rather thought that Grieg deserved some.

Back to Hampson for a moment: It just so happens that, sometime in the mid-1990s, I heard him give a recital at George Mason University in Virginia. He was singing a group of barge songs, I believe—those river ballads of which he is fond—and the audience, obedient, did not applaud between items. After the end of one song, where he particularly wanted applause, apparently, he remarked—right there on the stage—"You've been too well trained." Some audiences can never win!

This year, as you may know, is the centenary of the death of Hugo Wolf. It is also the bicentennial of the birth of Hector Berlioz, and the eightieth-birthday year of Ned Rorem. All of these anniversaries have been marked recently in New York. Not long after his outing with the Emerson String Quartet, Thomas Hampson appeared again in Carnegie Hall for an all-Wolf recital with Daniel Barenboim at the keyboard. And a month before *that*, Marilyn Horne had appeared at the Juilliard School for one of her master classes. She had the kids sing only Wolf—song after song. She lamented that Wolf was not more often heard in the recital hall, speculating that he was shoved aside for Richard Strauss. But she allowed that it would be good to hear more of this highly distinctive master in 2003.

Wolf was the "discovery" of Walter Legge, the magisterial executive for EMI, the British record company. If Legge did not discover him, he certainly popularized him. It didn't hurt—in fact, it meant close to everything—that Legge's wife was Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, the German soprano who became Wolf's champion. She gave many all-Wolf recitals, including at least one with Wilhelm Furtwängler, the great conductor, at the keyboard. The recital I have in mind was captured on recording. On this evidence, Furtwängler (also a composer, by the way) wasn't a great pianist; he wasn't even a good pianist—but it was a nice gesture.

Daniel Barenboim, of course, is a very good pianist, and Hampson is a valuable lieder singer. Among his teachers was Schwarzkopf herself, who no doubt imparted her wisdom in her typically pointed way.

Elsewhere, Ned Rorem was acknowledged with a birthday concert at the Manhattan School of Music. It's hard to believe the old rascal's eighty. He certainly doesn't look it, as handsome, spry, and tart as ever. He is still more enfant terrible than grand old man. Last fall, I interviewed him for MuseNews, the newish wire service devoted to the arts. I asked whether he had anything he would especially like to compose in the years ahead—any "unfinished business." He said, "No, I've said everything I have to say." Besides which, "I have commissions that will take some years to be completed." And did it weigh on him, I wondered, what posterity would think of him? *Whether* it would think of him? "Yeah," he said. "I know people who say, 'I don't care what happens to me after I die.' But I do, and I

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

see no point in living otherwise. . . . I like to think that music and words go on. In the world we live in, you get edged out so quickly."

Rorem will not be edged out—certainly not in his birthday year of 2003. As for posterity, one must leave that to posterity.

And Berlioz, the two-hundred-year-old? We are positively swimming in him, and it won't end until December. Already we've had *Les Troyens* at the Met, the Requiem from the New York Philharmonic (conducted by Charles Dutoit), Sir Colin Davis doing a festival at Avery Fisher Hall with the London Symphony Orchestra, innumerable other explorations, restatings, and tributes. The Berliozians are in hog heaven. As for others: They will simply have to ride it out. The next Berlioz explosion won't take place until 2053.

Do you remember the last time you went to an all-wind chamber concert? My point exactly: They are a rarity—but they shouldn't be, necessarily. If you were to go to such a concert, you would do well to make it one by the Ensemble Wien-Berlin. This is a group composed of principal wind players from the Vienna Philharmonic and the Berlin Philharmonic. The ensemble is not a start-up, celebrating now its twentieth anniversary (speaking of those). A recent tour included Alice Tully Hall—which was packed, I should report, on a late Sunday afternoon at the beginning of a blizzard. This audience must have known something.

I have referred to this concert as all-winds, but that is not quite true: The Ensemble was joined by a pianist, for two of the works on the program. That pianist was André-Michel Schub. Does the name ring a bell to you? Years ago—in 1981—he won the Van Cliburn competition, and he was a very big deal. (The Van Cliburn competition was a much bigger deal in those days, too.) Great things were expected of Schub, and he has had a solid career. But it has not been a superstar's career. It has been a quieter career, filled with a variety of satisfactions—e.g., a windy chamber concert like this.

Opening the program was Beethoven's Quintet in E-flat major for Oboe, Clarinet, Bassoon, Horn, and Piano, Op. 16. As soon as the Ensemble Wien-Berlin—plus Schub—started to play, you knew you were in the company of civilized men. It doesn't take any longer: just a bar or two. Few things are more disheartening than hearing the first notes of a concert and knowing that you're in for a bumpy ride. Few things are more encouraging than a wonderful start, promising a couple of hours' fulfillment.

Schub's playing was exemplary. His phrasing was elegant, his technique was nimble, and his musical collegiality was obvious. He played Beethoven with both poetry and strength. A student of Rudolf Serkin, he has the Serkin-like firmness, but he is a far more relaxed and supple player than his mentor. (I might note here that, in this same period, Peter Serkin—son of the late master—played the Brahms D-minor concerto with the New York Philharmonic [Eds: See Patrick J. Smith's "Concert note" following this chronicle]. Young Serkin seems to be playing more like the old man, and looking like him, with every passing year.)

After the Beethoven came a work by Janáček: *Mládí*, or "Youth." As the title suggests, this is an autobiographical look back, by a composer near the end of his life. It is a fond look back, too. We seem to be in a big Janáček year, though no anniversary applies. *Jenůfa*, of course, played to great acclaim at the Metropolitan Opera, and sundry other works have been sprinkled around the concert halls and recital halls.

Mládí calls for a flute and a piccolo (Wolfgang Schulz, first deskman of the Vienna Philharmonic, handled both instruments), an oboe, a clarinet, a bassoon, a horn, and a bass clarinet. Each player was golden: Schulz displayed both virtuosity and refinement, the oboist Hansjörg Schellenberger produced a remarkably unnasal sound . . . and the French hornist, Stefan Dohr? He did things on that instrument that are just not supposed to be done on that instrument.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Next on the program was a quintet of Reicha—no, not Steve Reich, but Anton Reicha, who was a contemporary of Beethoven and who made a specialty of these wind quintets, penning no fewer than twenty-four of them. The one we heard on this occasion—that in D major, op. 91, no. 3—is well crafted and congenial, utterly deserving of its unearthing. I must say once more that it was astonishing to hear that French horn. French horns are supposed to flub, and just get by. It is probably the most forgiven instrument because it is one of the hardest. But Stefan Dohr—principal of the Berlin Philharmonic—is almost a coloratura French hornist, which is a ridiculous phrase, until you actually hear Dohr. In addition, he can summon up any number of colors. A young man, he may well be the king of his instrument.

The last work played was the Sextet of Poulenc, a composer who loved winds—who declared that they were more important to him than strings. Much of the happiest literature in the field comes from him. It is often said that Poulenc was either bawdy or holy—swinging between those extremes. But the Sextet, rather than bawdy, is tart, saucy, fizzy, playful, jazzy, plaintive: and thoroughly French. The Ensemble Wien-Berlin, with André-Michel Schub again, showed it to best effect.

You might have considered this concert a "specialty concert"—almost a curiosity. But the chamber repertory for winds needs to be exposed, and this was one of the most rewarding concerts—from all points of view—of the season.

One night in early March, we had a taste of the Philadelphia Orchestra future: Christoph Eschenbach guest-conducted them in Carnegie Hall. He won't be a guest conductor for long. He is slated to take over as music director next fall, with the retirement—or at least the departure from Philadelphia—of Wolfgang Sawallisch. The latter has been doing a Schumann series at Carnegie, conducting all four symphonies and the concertos (for piano, violin, and cello). These performances have been wise and tasteful, even if I have asked for more brio and uplift (for example, in the B-flat symphony, nicknamed "the Spring").

About Eschenbach, a lot of people are nervous. Lovers of the Philadelphia Orchestra are tense. Eschenbach is no doubt a talented man, but he is an uneven and willful conductor. You never quite know what you're going to get from him. I have heard him conduct some truly wretched performances—I think of a Mahler Sixth with the New York Philharmonic. I have heard him conduct some superb performances—I could cite an *Arabella* (by Richard Strauss) at the Met. And many other outings have been merely indifferent.

One thing's sure: People in Philadelphia will enjoy *looking* at Eschenbach, except for purer, more decorum-minded ones. He is one of the most animated podium performers in the business. He is fantastically energetic, making Lorin Maazel, for example, seem almost sedate. But where Maazel is elegant and balletic, Eschenbach is more herky-jerky and blunt. Maazel is also more economical than Eschenbach, for whom no amount of motion, apparently, can be too much. But, as I have remarked before in these pages, the most important thing for a conductor is communication: and how he achieves it is entirely up to him. If the orchestra understands what is wanted and responds, that's all that matters.

Beginning the recent program was—of course—Berlioz, his overture to *Benvenuto Cellini*. (Incidentally, the Metropolitan Opera will mount its first-ever production of this neglected opera next season.) The overture is one of this composer's most fetching short pieces, full of merriment and romance. Eschenbach led a peppy performance, but it was not technically sharp, and one can certainly get as much out of an orchestra with less exhorting and other carrying on.

The major work of the evening was Shostakovich's Symphony No. 5, a piece long associated with the Philadelphians. Eugene Ormandy was an early champion of

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

it and, of course, recorded it. In the opening movement, Eschenbach was surprisingly tender and lyrical, applying much less tension than is customary. The playing seemed a little too rich, not cold or bleak enough (not that this music has to be stereotypically "Russian," or, better, "Soviet"). Eschenbach's baton was slow and mannered. One wanted to say, "Get on with it, and let the music speak, with no 'interpretive' interference." The conductor balanced his slowness by taking the faster sections extra-fast.

The second movement had a nice vigor, but Eschenbach always lets you know he's there, particularly in his tempo fluctuations. And, again, the orchestra did not exactly function like a Swiss clock, technically. Sawallisch's discipline was absent. The third movement—Largo—is, needless to say, one of the most beautiful things in the symphonic literature. It was depressing that Eschenbach's opening phrase had no naturalness whatsoever. Every note was "placed"—by him—rather than simply breathed. But the movement built capably, and the woodwind solos were fabulous.

The final movement was quite fast—despite its marking: Allegro non troppo—but it was sturdy and compact, just as Shostakovich wants. It had aural and visceral power, of course—but how could it not, with a splendid machine like the Philadelphia Orchestra? The performance was creditable enough, but one felt that the entire drama had not been wrung out of this work, and that this orchestra had been somewhat wasted. The ending was hugely slow, with Eschenbach literally conducting every note. This was manufactured, manipulated, and wrong.

But we all have to settle in, because Christoph Eschenbach is just beginning with his new band, and conductors of the Philadelphia Orchestra tend to stay a long time. In fact, it has had only four conductors since 1912. You may claim I'm cheating, however: because Ormandy stayed for forty-four years. The likes of that tenure, we will probably not see again. Anywhere.

Concert note

David Robertson with the New York Philharmonic, Avery Fisher Hall

David Robertson is one of the most promising young American conductors, and his one-week stint with the New York Philharmonic offered an interesting, if peculiar, mix of old and new.

On February 26, the first piece, the D-minor piano concerto of Brahms with Peter Serkin as soloist, immediately renounced its identity as the traditional symphonic battlehorse. Episodic, willful, and proudly self-indulgent, this performance stretched out in its dawdling way to almost an hour, making the once-notorious but now quite benign traversal of Glenn Gould in 1962 seem like a three-minute mile. Serkin mooned over the passages and exquisitely delayed the cadences in his raptness of vision, seconded by Robertson. The concerto collapsed into fragments, but was mightily applauded.

After the intermission, Robertson played the United States premiere of *Listening Earth*, a symphonic drama by the noted Danish composer Poul Ruders, whose recent operatic setting of Margaret Atwood's *Handmaid's Tale* has been acclaimed. The piece is another exercise in massed orchestral sonorities (a genre currently popular with a number of today's composers), springing from a poem by Joseph Addison. It is smartly set for big orchestra, glittering and shimmering with occasional solo instruments hovering over the welter. The piece ends with a response to September 11: whiplash percussion continuing while the orchestra fades away. Ruders's grasp of his materials is sure, and his sense of form strong, but little profile remains after the sounds have drifted away.

The long concert ended with a taut and dynamic performance of Janáček's *Sinfonietta*. The harnessed congeries of sound supported by the brassy immediacy of fourteen trumpets stamped the piece with Janáček's utter individuality.

—*Patrick J. Smith*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The media

Rather not

by James Bowman

Fifty-seven boxes were recently returned to the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniya in Zeit trucks—large Russian military vehicles—by the Iraqi government authorities. Each box contained a dead child, eyes gouged out and ashen white, apparently drained of blood. The families were not given their children, were forced to accept a communal grave and then had to pay 150 dinars for the burial.
—London Sunday *Observer*, 1987

When the man responsible for such an atrocity—one among many others and not by any means the worst—appears on American television to talk to "America's most respected newsman" about his hopes and fears, his devotion to his people, his respect for American leaders, and his strong religious faith, is it then just a matter of good manners not to mention the dead children, like John Cleese's character in "Fawlty Towers" not mentioning the war to his German guests? Presumably Dan Rather, who recently (as he puts it) "found himself" interviewing Saddam Hussein in one of the latter's presidential palaces in Baghdad, would say that it was. And, unlike Basil Fawlty, Rather was far too slick to get caught inadvertently mentioning his interlocutor's career as a mass murderer.

But manners, like TV, can only operate within a limited moral framework. The intimacy and familiarity of the medium naturally lead us to assume that those who appear on it inhabit the same moral world as ourselves—not only because it is good manners to assume this in the absence of any compelling reason to believe otherwise, but also because it is TV's own most basic assumption. Extremes either of good or evil simply don't show up on TV, whose essential and democratic property it is to reduce everyone and everything to the same level. Though the stories of Saddam Hussein's atrocities over a quarter of a century are well-attested and not seriously disputed by anyone, they have not, for obvious reasons, left an extensive pictorial record behind them. And even the most solidly established facts that remain unpictured seem shadowy and unreal on a medium where everything is pictured.

Even where there are pictures, and graphic ones, the impressions they convey are not necessarily realistic ones. By now it has become almost a truism that the Vietnam War was won and lost on television. The conventional wisdom supposes that the American people, though initially supportive of their leaders' claims that Communism had to be defeated in Southeast Asia, shifted towards opposition to the war when they saw the reality of the war on television, by which is meant the blood and violence of it. The growth of antiwar feeling and the demonstrations prompted by this shocking realization ultimately, so the story goes, forced the Nixon administration to get out of the war, proclaiming that it had achieved "peace with honor."

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

I don't suppose that this view of the matter is entirely false and meretricious—though it does seem strange that, as the polling data suggest, it took at least six or seven years' worth of those graphic and moving pictures to produce a majority against the war—but the claim ought to be treated with some suspicion if only because it is so transparently self-serving. For the legend of the efficacy of the news media in crowbarring their country out of the Vietnam War is intimately bound up with the news media's view of the illegitimacy and even immorality of that war. And the two go together to produce one of the three great landmarks—the other two are the civil rights movement and Watergate—in the great saga of media triumphalism.

They are also, the cynic might say, landmarks in the media's long march to dominance over the nation's traditional republican institutions. What is undeniable is that the adherents of this mythology have based their arrogance and self-conceit very largely on the moral capital they suppose themselves or their journalistic predecessors to have acquired by performing such signal public services—to the American public, if not to the Vietnamese. Which is why the mythologization of the war continues. As I write, I notice that they're showing a TV movie on a cable network about the heroic story of Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers. There may, I suppose, still be two opinions about the wisdom of American withdrawal from Vietnam, even though, as a disingenuous reporter pointed out at President Bush's press conference on March 6, the dangers to ourselves of a Communist victory forecast by our leaders at the time have not come to pass. But what will not stand up to even a moment's scrutiny is the assumption that what appears on television is in any sense "reality."

Almost any medium through which wars are or ever have been perceived is more "real" than television, whose nature it is to homogenize and reduce to bland familiarity any reality that drops into the televisual sausage machine. There was a hilarious illustration of this truism in the aftermath of the Rather–Hussein interview when it transpired that CBS had hired an actor named Steve Winfield, a man with a talent for speaking in a variety of foreign accents, to read the part of Saddam's translator—in fact there had been several of them—in a false Arabic accent. This was, said a spokesman, "in complete compliance with CBS News Standards." An executive at a rival network said: "The general consensus in the industry was it was pretty dumb, but it's not a game-over kind of error." Why, after all, should CBS be censured for making sure, as all the networks do, that "reality" conforms to its audience's expectations?

It is because of television's ability to deform everything at which its cameras point into a uniform *un*reality that we so love it, for that unreality is always and inevitably a comforting one, even when it shows us horrific acts of violence. When the Vietnam war was at its height, people had already been looking at acts of violence on TV for twenty years. There was, to be sure, a certain titillation provided by the reflection that the violence on the news was "real"—just as there is today in those "reality" series where familiar stories of courtship or survival are ostensibly taking place outside the fictional TV framework which has made them familiar. Yet I doubt that more than a small fraction of the audience for such programs thinks of them as *really* real, since they look at least as much like fakery as everything else on TV.

"Survivor," for example, never produces any deaths or any serious danger of death—nothing more than occasional discomfort and some minor injuries. Nor do any of the shows featuring Bachelors or Bachelorettes allegedly about to be paired off with someone after being put through their elaborate TV courtships ever produce any actual marriages. Yet we call these "reality" shows because, at least compared to the staple TV diet of sitcoms and soap operas, they are relatively unscripted. The rather fluid boundaries between fiction and reality also

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

apply to the news, which most viewers are by now wise enough to know is only a version of reality, owing much to the editing and scripting that has brought it to television.

People in the 1960s knew this already. Television, like the movies before it, was largely built on violence. The very existence of a generic quality called "violence" (as opposed to my violence and your violence, good violence and bad violence, which would have been completely inseparable from any question of generic violence until quite recent times) depends largely on television. Everything is generic on TV, and everything is domesticated. So "violence" whether real or imaginary comes out looking substantially the same. People can't tell the difference because they don't want to tell the difference, of course, but TV is a great help, since it makes the violence look all the same. The impact of the violence we see on TV is therefore diminished, and it is further diminished by the repetition. In fact, there is a case to be made, I think, that the war in Vietnam was actually *lengthened* by the nightly images of violence. Outrage and familiarity don't go well together.

But there is one way in which television really does have a political impact, and an impact conducive to "peace"—if by "peace" we mean what the protestors mean, namely the refusal of their own country to fight. Real peace, in the sense of the absence of violence, is neither here nor there. You could ask an Iraqi. But television will always prove a valuable weapon in the "antiwar" arsenal to the extent that it does not allow for the existence of either great good or great evil. All is reduced to the same blandly human scale, so that Dan Rather's interview with Saddam Hussein—a man unquestionably responsible for the deaths of hundreds of thousands, including many brutal murders—might as well be with Ricky Ricardo so far as the innocent eyes of his audience are concerned.

Pointing the cameras at the enemy and allowing him to talk will immediately wash any sense of the reasons why people go to war out of the minds of the viewers and replace them with this same banality. Maybe this is a good thing. Certainly it is if you are a pacifist. But if you believe that it is sometimes necessary to go to war, it is a very bad thing indeed in those cases in which war is necessary. The mere fact of the interview, once it had occurred, was enough to confer the kind of legitimacy on Saddam that we are accustomed to in our own leaders—a fact which he himself surely recognized when he took the occasion to challenge President Bush to a debate. Rather was of course too impressed with himself for hobnobbing with a world statesman to notice his own part in this effort at legitimation.

This inability to see when they are being used by someone like Hussein is all but endemic among journalists, even those who don't themselves get to preen on television. Hence stories like the one on the Reuters wire about Saddam's own televisual presence titled: "Saddam Keeps Finger on Baghdad Pulse" by Samia Nakhoul. This about a man who is well known for torturing and murdering any who dare to raise dissident voices! "Saddam Keeps Foot on Baghdad's Neck" would be more accurate. Yet the story told of how the dictator is always among his people chatting with and exhorting them.

> As part of his effort to rally his people, Saddam talks the language of every Iraqi—from soldier to villager—recalling his early days as a modest fighter and village boy. He regularly interrupts the officers to send greetings to this army unit, residents of that village, this tribal and clan chieftain. He shares a joke or invites them to drink tea. If words and body language are anything to go by, the Iraqi president is not about to retreat to his bunker as war with the United States appears closer.

Ah, but that's just it, isn't it? Whether or not words and body language are anything to go by, they're *all* that television has to go by, a fact well understood by the Iraqi ministry of propaganda but not, seemingly, by Samia Nakhoul—or Dan Rather.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The point is not that Rather should have aggressively challenged his interlocutor as he would have done with, say, an elected official back home. If he were to have read out even a few of the available reports of Saddam's atrocities, even safely back in the studio, it would have sounded unreal—not because it would have been unreal but because it would have been untelevisual. TV has its own reality—as the spate of "reality" programming over the past three years ought to have made clear. The point is that he should not have been there in the first place, lending respectability to such a monster by presenting Saddam Hussein, as such an interview has by its very nature to do, as a world statesman, every bit the equal of others interviewed by the great Dan Rather, and not a criminal murderer.

In fact, Rather's obsequiousness to the man he called "the Arab Avenger" suggested that the conferring of stature was from Saddam to him rather than the reverse. By the end of the interview, Rather was clearly reveling in his own self-importance as he genially reminisced with the dictator about their past association. "I appreciate your remembering that we met in 1990. And I interviewed you in this very building. Given the sober moment and the danger at hand, what are the chances this is the last time you and I will see each other?" As Tim Graham, an analyst for the excellent Media Research Center, pointed out, "Rather and Saddam have met two times in their long lives for a total of about four hours. But Rather seemed to want to underline their somehow notable personal relationship as historical figures."

Perhaps it was catching, since Saddam, in just previously having proposed to debate President Bush, was similarly trying to raise his own status. As Jenny McCartney wrote in the London *Sunday Telegraph*, "Merely by appearing on television with the US President, Saddam—possibly in the well-cut pinstripe suit that he wore to meet Dan Rather—would be elevated to the status of Bush's political equal." But, she might have added, the proposal could have been Saddam's wry comment on the fact that Dan Rather sought, merely by appearing on television with the Iraqi dictator, to be elevated to the status of *his* political equal. Of course the price of Dan's self-affirmation was the humanization of a monster. "When we witness someone being pleasant on television," writes Miss McCartney, "it becomes almost impossible also to imagine them being truly, deeply vile: the longer a dictator smiles under the studio lights, the further the stench of his torture-chambers recedes."

In one sense Rather and Hussein are somewhat similar characters—in their complete lack of any sense of self-irony. In his own account in *The Wall Street Journal* of how the interview came about—which, by the way, does not mention the contribution of the former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who is now trying to arrange the impeachment of President Bush—Rather wrote for instance that the proposal for the interview was put to Tariq Aziz who "listened and then said that they liked the fact that I knew the region well and had a reputation for being independent." Gee, Dan, can you think of any reason why he might have said that—apart, I mean, from the fact that it is so resoundingly true? But then an utter lack of a sense of irony is probably part of the job description of TV anchor men, right up there with a full head of hair. What was more disappointing was when even those TV critics who take the stuff home in sackfuls for, presumably, spotting such ironies, didn't spot this one.

Thus Tom Shales of *The Washington Post* couldn't see that the interview was not really about Saddam but about Sad Dan, whose spectacular "get," said he, represented "an undisputed triumph for Rather and reaffirms his position as America's premier newsman." The question, Who is the star here? used to arise occasionally in connection with celebrity interviews as an amusing paradox. Now, apparently, there is no doubt about it—and no reason to be amused. Rather's "questioning was tough, blunt,

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

thorough, and unaffected by posturing. And it has to be said that Saddam Hussein handled himself well, too, suggesting he is still his own best propagandist," wrote Shales. This is simply false in every detail: the questioning was not in the least tough but cravenly obsequious and full of posturing; Saddam gave only the official Iraqi version of reality that is and has long been drearily familiar. His answers to Rather's questions were all bald assertions, many of them patently false, which he insisted be taken at their face value.

But Shales is as much bound by journalistic convention as Dan Rather. "Saddam Hussein was predictable, perhaps, but no more predictable than Bush is," he writes. "Americans who pay attention to the news know how Bush will react to any new Iraqi proposal (reject it) or accusation (deny it) or contention (call it a lie). Hussein said Iraq has no missiles exceeding United Nations guidelines and the administration says it does. And so on." This is the official liberal line as adapted for use by the even-handed and neutral media, namely that the truth value of propositions uttered by Saddam Hussein and George Bush is to be treated as being exactly the same—unless, as Democratic congressmen Jim McDermott and David Bonior notoriously insisted it should be, the benefit of the doubt is given to the dictator.

Not that Shales was being taken in. No sir. "He was taking pains not to come across like the reckless, ruthless dictator described in U.S. rhetoric. He wasn't exactly a cuddly old dumpling, however." What Shales doesn't see is that the meeting itself and the set-up of the interview as a familiar TV moment are what make him something other than "the reckless, ruthless dictator described in U.S. rhetoric"—which "rhetoric," by the way, happens to be the truth of the matter by any definition of "reckless," "ruthless," or "dictator" that Mr. Shales would care to name. But of course we understand that he must not say so, for fear of losing face among his fellow ostentatiously independent newshounds.

Like Rather himself asking Saddam to insult instead of flattering him, lest he be thought to have been co-opted—as the request itself showed that he was—Shales's main concern is not to reveal the truth about Saddam Hussein or Rather or the interview but to protect his own standing as a journalist, according to the requirements of the American journalistic culture. Thus "The interview, and the 'get' that preceded it, could be seen as a notable career capper—or one of a series—for the seventy-one-year-old Rather," says Shales, who predicts the great man's retirement from the CBS "anchor" chair by the end of the year. Bravo, Dan! Whatever death and misery the war may bring—or, as some say, end—we can rest easy that it has enabled your career to be capped.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Books

The war to begin all wars

by Victor Davis Hanson

Military history has not been very popular after the Vietnam War. Perhaps the unease is because war itself is felt to have little utility in a postmodern world. No longer are disagreements said to arise from good squared off against evil, but rather from faulty discourse and misunderstandings between two nearly indistinguishable sides offering competing "narratives." Recourse to violence, it seems nowadays, reneges on the promises of the Enlightenment: surely disputes result from ignorance and thus can be settled through proper talk and shared insight. More often the lessons of war lie not in military history, but are to be found in what our universities now offer as "Peace Studies" or "Conflict Resolution Theory."

When it comes to our martial past, we in our present pride tend to cast moral aspersions on history's Neanderthals: those benighted combatants on both sides who, unlike ourselves, resorted to war out of stupidity, greed, exploitation, vanity, or quests for power. But more often, we in the university simply do not want to read about war at all. Thus in the most recent *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (third edition, 1996)—the classicist's invaluable guide to the people, places, and ideas of the ancient Greek and Roman worlds—the entry under "Peloponnesian War" earns a pitiful twenty-one lines: far fewer than "Gynaecology" at eighty-one lines, "Magic" at 122, "Homosexuality" at 337, or "Literary Theory" at 435. And in that authoritative dictionary's single short paragraph about the war we read that the twenty-seven-year-long conflict—a conflict that wrecked fifth-century Athens and altered the course of the Greek city-states—"was recorded by the great historian Thucydides *and that is the most interesting thing about it*" (emphasis added).

So without Thucydides' *Peloponnesian War*, was the real Peloponnesian War—the fact, the event, what we might call the non-text version—just an uninteresting few thousand dead here and there, an unimportant democracy wrecked, and a minor renaissance ended? Forget that a quarter of the population of Athens (including Pericles) died within four years from a mysterious plague; forget that entire cities—including Potidaea, Mytilene, Plataea, Scione, and Melos—were either brutally conquered or simply razed; forget that almost 40,000 Athenians and their allies perished on Sicily, or that dramatic masterpieces—*Trojan Women*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Acharnians* and others—grew out of the ordeal. Put all that to one side because now, according to the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, "the most interesting thing" about that great conflict was the fact that Thucydides *wrote* about it. Brilliant, of course, Thucydides was: perhaps the greatest mind the ancient world produced. And his history did not merely chronicle the war but also analyzed it as a vehicle to explain to us the unchanging nature of man and his tenuous grip on civilized life. Nevertheless, the

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Peloponnesian War—the event, not the text—*is* the seminal historical event of the Greek city-state. It transcended even the genius who wrote about it and lesser chroniclers such as Xenophon, Plutarch, and Diodorus who rounded out the story. (Thucydides' unfinished account breaks off amid the events of 411 BC.) Facts really do exist without texts.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001, Americans at war worried about the outbreak of plague in their cities. Newspaper columnists warned that sending troops abroad to far distant Afghanistan or Iraq was tantamount to sending them to perish like the Athenian armada in Sicily. Newscasters admonished us not to bully neutrals as if they were poor Melians. In turn, defenders of the war argued that the United States was a democratic, open society—an Athens fighting for its life against those who preferred hierarchies and various castes of subservience. Neither side could agree whether America was an ascendant civilization or at the brink of an Athenian-like collapse, exhausted and so demoralized by a culture of excess that it no longer either believed in, or could defend, itself. Nevertheless, most agreed that the so-called "war on terrorism" was "new" and could drag on for "decades."

The Peloponnesian War, then, is not really so ancient. Even if some classicists think that Athens's war with Sparta was relatively uninteresting, outsiders still write books with titles like *War and Democracy: A Comparative Study of the Korean War and the Peloponnesian War* or *Hegemonic Rivalry: From Thucydides to the Nuclear Age*. The conflict continues to be evoked in the present—its supposed lessons both astutely and clumsily applied to most of our own wars of the last century.

Russia—or was it really Hitler's Germany?—purportedly was like oligarchic Sparta in its efforts to destroy a democratic, sea-faring America. Did not the Cold War, after all, similarly divide up the world into two armed camps, former allies who had united against the common enemy only a half century later to face off into decades of hostilities? Modern observers still recall that Victorian and maritime England (read: imperial Athens) went to war twice against the great land armies of autocratic Germany with its Prussian warrior code (read: modern Sparta). Do democracies—with their moral laxity and messiness—ultimately lose fights against more authoritarian states? Or was Thucydides right in concluding that democracies are more resilient and imaginative than other governments at war? Was the Sicilian expedition a lesson for Gallipoli, Vietnam, or any proposed great democratic crusade abroad?

Why is this ancient war between tiny Athens and Sparta still so often used and misused? First, it was long—twenty-seven years—and it lined up the entire Greek world into opposite armed camps. Second, the two antagonists were antithetical in nearly every respect, and thus the bipolar fighting was proclaimed to be a final arbiter of their respective values—political and cultural values that still divide us today. Third, it started in Greece's great Golden Age, and its attendant calamity was felt to have ended for good that period of great promise. Fourth, players in the war were the greats of Hellenic civilization—Socrates, Pericles, Euripides, Alcibiades, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and others—and their lives and work reflect that seminal experience. Fifth, Athens lost, casting into doubt ever since not merely the power but also the morality of democracy, especially when it executed Socrates in the war's aftermath. Sixth—and at last we arrive at the theme of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*'s brief entry on the war—Greece's preeminent historian, Thucydides, was not merely an analytical and systematic writer of a great extant history; he was also a brilliant philosopher who tried to lend to the events of the war a value that transcended his own time, making his history of ideas "a possession for all time" that could furnish lessons for men at war in any age. Thucydides' man of the ages is a pretty savage creature whose known murderous

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

proclivities are kept in check—albeit just barely—by an often tenuous and hard-to-maintain civilization.

"A great war and more worthy of relation than any that had preceded it," Thucydides wrote, contending at the outset of his history that the struggle between the two opposing city-states would be cataclysmic because both belligerents were at the height of their powers and were eager to draw the rest of the Greek world into the equivalent of an ancient Hellenic World War. "The greatest disturbance in history," he soberly added of the conflict that consumed his own adult life. Even 2,500 years later we tend to agree that it sabotaged much of what Greece could have accomplished. "It is," the classicist Donald Kagan concludes in his newly condensed history of the war,[1]

> both legitimate and instructive to think of what we call the Peloponnesian War as "the great war between Athens and Sparta," as one scholar designated it, because, like the European war of 1914–18 to which the title "the Great War" was applied by an earlier generation that knew only one, it was a tragic event, a great turning point in history, the end of an era of progress, prosperity, confidence, and hope, and the beginning of a darker time.

Most wars, of course, do not end like they start. Before Shiloh (April 6–8, 1862), for example, Grant thought one great battle would win the Civil War. After the battle he realized that years, thousands of lives, and millions of dollars in capital were needed to ruin rather than defeat a recalcitrant Confederacy. So too the Spartans marched into Attica in Spring 431 BC thinking that a year or two of old-style ravaging of fields would bring them victory; seven years later neither side was closer to victory, and they still had another twenty far-worse seasons to go.

If the earlier united victory over the Persian king Xerxes (480–479 BC) marked the inauguration of the triumphant Golden Age, this classical century that started with such great promise finally crashed with the self-inflicted wreckage of the city-states. Thousands of free Greeks who had once united to fight Persians now killed each other and aided Persians. The carnage that Darius and Xerxes once could only hope for at Marathon and Salamis, Pericles, Cleon, Alcibiades, Brasidas, Gylippus, and Lysander a half century later brought about, killing more of their own people in a year than had the Persians in a decade.

Thucydides felt strongly that Sparta had invaded the Athenian countryside in spring 431 because "they feared the growth of the power of the Athenians, seeing most of Hellas already subject to them." Of course, there were various other more immediate pretexts for war—Athens had imposed economic sanctions against Megara, a Spartan ally; both sides sought to draw a neutral island of Corcyra into their respective alliances; they each quarreled over the loyalty of the key northern city of Potidaea; the Boeotians wished to eliminate the outpost city of Plataea that brought fear of Athenian imperialism to their doorstep. And so on.

But Thucydides stuck to his thesis about the "clash of civilizations," believing that there were larger underlying differences between the two powers—perhaps not always perceptible to Athenians and Spartans themselves—that would ensure the more immediate and minor disagreements would eventually lead to a cataclysm. After all, if Sparta ignored the pretexts of Corinthian and Megarian grievances, the sheer dynamism of Pericles' imperial culture—majestic buildings, drama, comedy, intellectual fervor, an immense fleet, radical democratic government, an expanding population, and a growing overseas empire—would eventually spread throughout the Peloponnese and offer incentives to Sparta's friends that she could not hope to match. Who, after all, could win a war of attrition against the world's first America—when you could offer only ingots as money, a ramshackle hovel as a national capital, and a Gestapo-

1 *The Peloponnesian War*, by Donald Kagan; Viking, 512 pages, $29.95.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

like storm corps in lieu of an army of liberation?

Still, scholars argue over Thucydides' glum appraisal that war was inevitable and overrode what individual Spartan and Athenian leaders might do or not do in any given crisis. Yet few now—in part thanks to the work of Professor Kagan—question his keen appraisal that states can war over ideas, perceptions, fears, and honor as well as particular material grievances. Sparta's fault in breaking the peace of 431 was not so much that it was culpable in any given context, but rather it was all too human—and thus prone to all the wild emotions that sometimes make men do what is not in either their own or the general interest. In the post-Marxist era, we still find it hard to think men will fight for reasons other than exploitation, colonialism, or for taking someone else's money or land.

The Peloponnesian War itself proved to be a colossal paradox. Sparta had the most feared infantry in the Greek world. Yet it was Sparta's newly created navy that finally won the great battles of the war. Democratic Athens sent almost 40,000 allied soldiers to their deaths trying to capture far-off Syracuse, the largest democracy in the Greek world—even as thousands more of her enemies were to plunder her property with impunity less than twenty miles outside her walls from the base at Decelea. Alcibiades at times proved the savior of Athens, Sparta, and Persia—and their collective spoiler as well. Athens started the war off with gold piled high in its majestic Parthenon; it ended the conflict broke and unable even to flute the final columns of the Propylae, the monumental gateway to the still unfinished temples on the acropolis. Sparta fielded the most terrifying army in Greece, and yet most of its opponents fell not in pitched battle, but rather either to disease, at sea, or in guerrilla-style killing.

Pericles planned the war and reminded his countrymen of what was required to see them through, but he did not even survive the conflict's third year—a victim of a plague that he helped to induce by ordering all of Athens's rural population to evacuate inside the crowded city's walls. The philosopher Socrates had doubts about democratic Athens's hubris and megalomania, but not enough reluctance to prevent him from fighting heroically in her cause in his pot-bellied middle age. Thucydides used the broad message of the war's senselessness to explore his bleak views about human nature, but no Athenian fought more unquestioningly and without cynicism in service to his country.

No ancient war—not Xerxes' invasion of Greece, the grandiose invasions of Alexander the Great, or Hannibal's romp into Italy—is more contradictory than the three decades of intramural fighting between Athens and Sparta: a land versus maritime power; the starkness of the Dorians contrasted with Ionian liberality; oligarchy pitted against democracy; ostentatious wealth set against practiced dearth; a majestic imperial city dethroned by a rural hamlet; and a humane imperialism that killed the innocent even as a garrison state championed the cause of state autonomy abroad. No wonder classicists tend to avoid it all and prefer to publish on its bits and pieces—treaties, generals, decrees, finances, rhetoric, and the like. It is all too big and confusing, and so by our experts in desperation better relegated to a single paragraph of twenty-one lines.

In contrast, Donald Kagan set out to chronicle the entire war in all its complexity. He did just that for much of his scholarly career while teaching at Cornell and Yale. Four volumes published over nearly twenty years, beginning in 1969 with the origins of the conflict and ending, in 1987, with the utter defeat of Athens. Kagan ranged widely throughout European history, invoking ancient wars to elucidate Spartan or Athenian strategy. He frequently posed counterfactual questions and often doubted Thucydides (most famously about the latter's judgment that the war was inevitable and arose from Spartan "fear" over growing Athenian power). Kagan asked practical questions

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

about the financing of the war, criticized Pericles' judgment, and occasionally labeled Thucydides a revisionist whose sober grand assessments did not always reflect the data of his own narrative.

It was not especially prudent of Kagan to begin a career by starting a grand multi-volume narrative about an ancient war—especially at Cornell at a time of another unpopular war and general campus unrest when most scholars were more interested in social, economic, and cultural history and turning out scads of articles and monographs for promotion and tenure rather than sober four-volume masterpieces. But Kagan persevered and his work endures thirty-four years after the first volume appeared for a variety of reasons besides its proven reliability, accuracy, and comprehensiveness. He went toe-to-toe with the great triad of German historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Georg Busolt, K. J. Beloch, and Eduard Meyer—most of their work still untranslated—and helped to reintroduce them, not always with approval, to a modern American audience. Kagan reminded us of the role of factions within the city-states, that Athens did not simply execute the Melians or Spartans seek a break in the hostilities, but rather particular groups of Athenians and Spartans did so and in constant friction that reflected their own wide disparities of wealth, property, and lineage.

But Kagan's greatest achievement was to remind us of the personal element in war—what Thucydides himself called "the human thing." (This was also a theme of Kagan's later book *On the Origins of War*.) It is not always cosmic ideas or profit and ideology that start wars, but rather very human urges of real people transferred to a grand scale—urges like honor, fear, prestige, and perceived (rather than real) grievances. The result is that his Peloponnesian War, like Thucydides' own, serves a wider didactic purpose than the preservation of old facts and ancient men's lives.

Kagan's history reminds us that fickle and weak people often say one thing precisely so that they can act on another. I wish our current critics would read of the professions and excuses of the hurt Spartans and aggrieved Athenians and then ask in a similarly skeptical mood why we should listen to what bin Laden says caused his jihad. For Kagan, Sparta was no more doomed to go to war than Hitler needed *Lebensraum*. Sparta went to war primarily because it thought it might win a cheap victory over an imperial Athens, and thereby increase it stature without much cost. Thebes attacked Plataea not simply because it posed a danger but because it offered an opportunity—an opportunity more psychological than material. Britain needed the Falklands no more than did Argentina, but the dictatorship of the latter saw a chance for a quick cheap victory that could placate domestic unrest, while England for its future security could not afford the dangerous precedent of letting a second-rate power attack a great nation with impunity. States then do, as Kagan reminds us, fight over perceptions and professions (*prophaseis*)—not always for sheep and rocky windswept islands in the South Atlantic.

In the present single volume, condensed by 75 percent from the four-volume original, Professor Kagan has tried to make the Peloponnesian War come alive as a story, taken for the most part from a judicious reading of Thucydides, Xenophon, Plutarch, and Diodorus. The astute comparisons to later wars, the footnotes, and scholarly controversies of the earlier volumes are gone. They are replaced by a fast-paced narrative, with plenty of maps, that presents the Peloponnesian War year by year in very short titled subsections. His earlier perceptions and judgments remain, but they are implicit and fade into the narrative. It is now the train of events that must take first stage.

Kagan's abridged *Peloponnesian War* is still important because the solid judgment of its author remains throughout. No one—not a majestic Pericles, a fiery Cleon, or the chameleon Alcibiades—can fool Don

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Kagan; he appreciates the genius of bad men he does not like, and praises the inspiration of rogues he despises. Bad plans like Sicily can work if implemented well; good ideas of good men failed in the Delium campaign for bad luck and the simple want of common sense. Things about radical Athens bother him, but not to such a degree that he denies its energy and dynamism. He admires Spartan discipline, but hardly the blinkered society that was at the bottom of it all. If democracy was often murderous, oligarchy and tyranny brought the same violence but without the grandeur.

Finally and most importantly, Kagan has no condescension for his subjects. Cleon and Brasidas, Nicias and Lysander are not silly squabbling ancient peoples in need of modern enlightenment, but men of universal appetites to be taken on their own terms, just like us whose occasional crackpot ideas, fears, jealousies, and sins can sometimes—if the thin veneer of civilization is suddenly stripped away—lead into something absolutely godawful. If you don't agree, ask the Serbians, Rwandans, Afghans—or those with cell phones and briefcases who politely boarded planes to butcher thousands.

Native fiction

Keith Windschuttle The Fabrication of Aboriginal History. Volume 1, Van Diemen's Land 1803–1847. Macleay Press, Sydney. A$49.95

reviewed by Geoffrey Blainey

The island of Tasmania is now seen in scholarly and unscholarly circles as the setting for one of the most disgraceful episodes in the recorded history of the human race. According to this story, virtually a whole people was wilfully exterminated by the incoming British—the rulers, soldiers, convicts, and free settlers. Various historians and other social scientists have described it as a policy of genocide, and a forerunner of what happened a century later in Hitler's Europe. In this wide-ranging work, the Australian historian Keith Windschuttle inspects the evidence for this genocide. He concludes that the argument relies heavily on the errors and bias of historians.

Tasmania was once called Van Diemen's Land—the Dutch were the first to map its coast. It was settled by the British from 1803, mainly as a receptacle for criminals and increasingly as a pasture for sheep. Whites and blacks soon clashed. The contrast between the economic life, forms of government, languages, and rituals of the the few thousand Aborigines and those of the invading British was acute. There was little chance of one people understanding the other. The Aborigines were the losers. The last full-blood Tasmanian Aborigine died in 1888, and most of the thousands who now call themselves indigenous Tasmanians possess only a minority strand of that ancestry.

The widely accepted explanation for this tragedy can be seen in many television documentaries and news articles. It was crystallized on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* of August 21, 2000 when an alleged massacre near the present city of Hobart nearly two centuries ago was described as "the opening shot in a war that would result in the near-extermination of Tasmanian Aborigines." The report adds that some of "the 50 or so killed that day were salted down and sent to Sydney as anthropological curiosities." It is a chilling story. Is it true?

Windschuttle examines this so-called massacre of 1804. Instead of forty or fifty Aboriginal deaths he finds that not more than three Aborigines were killed, probably in a defensive action. How then did this myth arise? Windschuttle argues that the first accusation of large-scale massacre was made "decades later by people who were not there at the time and, in most cases, were not even in the colony." As for the "salting down" of dead bodies for despatch to Sydney as mementos, the evidence likewise is frail. But the story is so widely

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

believed that the site of the alleged massacre was recently donated by the Tasmanian government to the local Aborigines as an act of goodwill.

With impressive thoroughness, Windschuttle inspects the diaries, newspapers, and official letters and reports cited by historians as their evidence, and often he sees that evidence wither or change shape. The Hobart *Town Courier* of 1826 is twice cited by a historian as providing the evidence for killings, but the newspaper turns out not to have been in existence that year! An Anglican clergyman's diary, confidently said to report the deaths of probably one hundred Aborigines and twenty Europeans in conflicts, reveals a total of only six deaths, four of whom were Aboriginal.

Brian Plomley, regarded by some as the most scholarly historian examining the fate of the Aborigines, is tripped by some of his own evidence. In listing the specific clashes between blacks and whites for November 1828, Plomley at one point added to his somber list the words "more killed," meaning that additional Aborigines were the victims of white violence. Windschuttle, indefatigable, looked up the hand-written police record. It did not assert "more killed" but "mare killed." In short a horse—described as "a valuable mare"—was the casualty. Windschuttle discovers so much mishandling of the evidence that he confines this miraculous conversion of one dead horse into several dead Aborigines to a footnote.

While Plomley did important research on the Tasmanian Aborigines and their way of life, his emotions perhaps blinded him. Of one important group of white settlers he wrote indignantly that they believed in extirpating the Aborigines—indeed they were "extirpationists almost to a man." Windschuttle examines the views of each of these settlers at great length. In the end he is forced to expose Plomley for defaming twelve of the fourteen settlers. I myself wondered whether Plomley, usually so painstaking, could have made such an error. I consulted the relevant pages of his published work. Clearly he had not digested some of his own major sources.

Lloyd Robson, the author of the largest history of Tasmania, also overrides crucial evidence. He confidently described an episode in which twenty-two Aborigines were killed on the one day at Oyster Bay. The sole "witness" turns out to have been living in India when the alleged massacre took place! After reading this section of the book I turned again to Robson's own narrative, thinking that perhaps he had been misunderstood, but the case against him is powerful. Even the witness himself denies that he was present.

Robson earlier in his career had performed impressive statistical research on the British convicts sent to Australia and on Australian soldiers who enlisted in the First World War. But on the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines he held passionate views which, according to Windschuttle, sometimes eroded his skills as a historian. It was Robson who also hinted—on the basis of flimsy evidence—that hundreds of Aborigines died as the result of deliberate poisoning. And yet Robson, to his credit, does not accept that a massacre took place at Hobart in 1804.

As historians, we all make errors from time to time. While reading the long recital of these failings, I felt an initial sympathy towards the Australian and overseas historians who were under such intense scrutiny. But many of their errors, made on crucial matters, beggared belief. Moreover their exaggeration, gullibility, and what this book calls "fabrication" went on and on. Admittedly, if sometimes the historians' errors had chanced to favor the Aborigines, and sometimes they had happened to favor British settlers, a reader might sympathetically conclude that there was no bias amongst the historians but simply an infectious dose of inaccuracy. Most of the inaccuracies, however, are used to bolster the case for the deliberate destruction of the Aborigines. This case has now been glibly accepted as gospel in many educational and

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

political circles and in some high legal circles.

Professor Lyndall Ryan's influential book *Aboriginal Tasmanians* is dissected in more than sixty pages. A magnifying glass is focused on her crucial claim that in the two years to November 1830 the British "roving parties captured about twenty Aborigines and killed about sixty." Windschuttle concludes that "none of Ryan's footnotes support her assertion." As for her claim that at the Eastern Marshes a party of whites killed five Aborigines, his research convinces him that this is "another piece of invention."

Ryan replied at length in *The Australian* newspaper on December 17, 2002. Her sole attempt to meet specific factual criticisms of her work is the following quarter-confession: "Windschuttle points to some factual errors in the footnoting of my original work. There are indeed a few minor errors that can easily be rectified." But he is not primarily criticizing the footnoting and a few minor errors. He is criticizing the main thrust of her narrative and what he sees as a wide array of major errors and omissions.

The Fabrication of Aboriginal History sometimes moves slowly. Windschuttle admits that he pays "so much attention to footnotes, citations and archival references" that some readers will be deterred from pressing on. He argues, however, that this was the only way of testing the worth of rival historians: "there was no choice but to address the fabric of their scholarship in order to unpick their work and to establish what really happened." In fact his book offers so many examples of the misuse of the original records that it would require many pages for a reviewer even to summarize the case laid out against the various historians involved.

For example, Professor Henry Reynolds, whose successful academic career has centered on Aboriginal–white relations in Australia, and whose opinions are said to have influenced the High Court of Australia in one of its landmark decisions, is strongly criticized for loading the dice. In his earlier book *The Killing of History*, Windschuttle had generally praised Reynolds. He now revises his opinion, after dissecting Reynolds's handling of evidence—including a most remarkable misquoting of a crucial document. In 1830 in Tasmania, Governor Arthur had expressed the fervent hope that by careful measures he could *prevent* "the eventual extirpation of the aboriginal race itself." Reynolds somehow deleted this compassionate wish when quoting the document verbatim. Instead he put into Arthur's mouth another phrase: what Governor Arthur really feared was the "eventual extirpation of the Colony." The meaning of one of the significant documents in early colonial history had thereby been drastically altered.

Windschuttle estimates the original Aborigines as numbering 2000—an estimate which is perhaps on the low side. Why did this population decline so tragically? He argues that the decline came partly from violence inflicted by the British colonists. He computes that death toll at 117, after listing "every killing of an Aborigine between 1803 and 1834 for which there is a plausible record of some kind." In addition the Aborigines' birth rate was lowered because maybe fifty women of reproductive age were sold to, or abducted by, the white seal-hunters living in nearby islands. More Aborigines died through intertribal fights. But probably the main killers were tuberculosis, influenza, and other diseases to which Tasmanians, living for thousands of years in total isolation, were as vulnerable as were the peoples of the pre-Columbus Americas, the Pacific Islands, and many other insulated parts of the world. On the dramatic decline of Tasmania's population the book concludes: "The evidence for disease, then, as the major cause of depopulation is compelling."

Not every side-argument in the book persuades me. My own view is that the original Tasmanians were not as backward, mentally and culturally, as Windschuttle sometimes depicts them. I think too that they were often ingenious as fighters and raiders on

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

their home terrain. But I agree with the dominating theme of the book—that the evidence for "genocide" or deliberate "extirpation" appears frail or false.

In a year or so, a counterattack will undoubtedly be launched. Flaws, major or minor, will probably be found in Windschuttle's book, as in any large exploratory or detective-like work. Even so, his book will ultimately be recognized as one of the most important and devastating written on Australian history in recent decades.

Prime problem

John Derbyshire Prime Obsession: Bernhard Riemann and the Greatest Unsolved Problem in Mathematics. Joseph Henry Press, 412 pages, $24.95

reviewed by James Franklin

With the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem in 1994, Derbyshire says, "the Riemann Hypothesis is now the great white whale of mathematical research." Even before that, it was regarded by mathematicians as the more significant problem—though not as old as FLT, it is more central to mathematics and probably a good deal harder.

And harder to explain. Of the two new books offering an account for a popular audience, *Prime Obsession* and Karl Sabbagh's *The Riemann Hypothesis* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), Derbyshire's offers the better insight. Sabbagh's is a well-written book with interesting stories from mathematicians working in the field, but Derbyshire is a talented expositor determined to make the reader understand some serious mathematics. A general reader with some memory of high school algebra who is willing to concentrate will come away with a grasp of what the problem is and why insiders are excited. Mathematicians in other fields will deepen any superficial understanding they may have, as well as picking up some new ideas on how to explain mathematical ideas.

The importance of the Riemann Hypothesis comes from its close connection to one of the most basic phenomena connected with numbers, the distribution of primes. At first glance, numbers all look much the same except for their size. They are not. Twelve eggs can be arranged as a rectangle of 6 eggs by 2, or 3 by 4. That cannot be done for 11 or 13 eggs. 11 and 13 are *primes*, numbers that cannot be written in any way as a product of smaller numbers. The primes less than 50 are:

2, 3, 5, 7, 11, 13, 17, 19, 23, 29, 31, 37, 41, 43, 47.

Between 980 and 1000, the only primes are 983, 991 and 997. Between 9980 and 10000, there are none. It can be seen that the primes thin out as we go further along the numbers (though they never run out). There is, however, an irregularity or jaggedness to the way they thin out. It is believed, though not proved, that there is an infinite number of prime pairs—that is, however far out we go, there is always an occasional pair of odd numbers only two apart that are both primes (like 41 and 43). There are indefinitely long stretches of numbers, however, with no primes at all. It is easy to understand why: to get a stretch of, say, 100 numbers without a prime, multiply together all the numbers from 1 to 101 and call the answer x. Then the 100 numbers

$$x + 2,\ x + 3,\ x + 4, \ldots,\ x + 101$$

are all non-primes (since $x + 2$ is divisible by 2 because x and 2 both are, $x + 3$ is divisible by 3, and so on). Thus the sequence of prime numbers, though it is a matter of absolute necessity and the same in all possible worlds, has the interplay of overall orderliness with local irregularity that we are accustomed to in sequences of throws of dice and coins. Einstein may or may not have been right to say that God does not play dice with the universe, but He certainly does not play dice with the primes. Numbers are not subject to chance or to any will, human or divine. That is what gives questions about the distribution of primes their peculiar fascination.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

The local irregularities make it hard to answer the "big-picture" question: at what rate do the primes thin out? What is the average density of primes—if we take a block of 1000 consecutive numbers around, say, 1 trillion (1,000,000,000,000), what proportion of them should we expect to be primes? The answer is given by the celebrated Prime Number Theorem, whose proof was one of the glories of late nineteenth-century mathematics. The density of primes near the number N is about $0.434/\log(N)$ (where $\log(N)$, called the logarithm of N, is the number of digits in N). The important item in this formula is not the 0.434, which relates to the fact that we have decided to write numbers in base 10 (if we wrote them in base 2 as computers do, the number of digits in N would be greater). The significant thing is that the density of primes thins out logarithmically—since 1 trillion has twice as many digits as 1 million, the density of primes around 1 trillion is half what it is around 1 million.

Riemann's 1859 paper, in which he introduced his Hypothesis, is a bold series of moves which gives a formula not only for the average density of primes but for all the irregularities as well. Late in his book, Derbyshire ambitiously but successfully unpacks this short and difficult paper, and explains how Riemann gives an exact formula for the deviations from the average density, so that one can calculate exactly how many primes there are in any block of numbers. The formula has a downside, however. It expresses the answer in terms of some mysterious entities called the zeros of the Riemann zeta function. There are an infinite number of these beings, and the Riemann Hypothesis says of them, "All the non-trivial zeros of the Riemann zeta function have real part one half." Explaining from a standing start what the Riemann zeta function and its zeros are in only half a book is not easy, and Derbyshire proves himself a leading mathematical communicator in being able to do it. "If you don't understand the Hypothesis after reading my book," he says, "you can be pretty sure you will never understand it." He is right.

The book is not all tough mathematics. Included, for example, is the bizarre connection between the way the zeros of the zeta function occur and the way some quantum mechanical systems are spaced. There is something on the use of prime numbers in internet security. There is some history, including the little there is to know about Riemann himself. He was pious, shy, depressed, and died of tuberculosis aged not quite forty. On the real world, his impact was minimal. When he went through the door into his study and tapped into the abstract world, he made enormous advances in several different mathematical fields. "Riemann's mathematics has the fearless sweep and energy of one of Napoleon's campaigns."

Derbyshire handles with kid gloves, as well he might, a question unavoidable when talking about an unproved hypothesis, that of probabilistic reasoning in pure mathematics. He writes that "Everybody knows that in mathematics you must prove every result by strict logic."

That is true in the sense that a strict proof of everything is sought, but it is not true if it means that anything not proved is not yet part of mathematics. If that were true, there would be no book about the Riemann Hypothesis, since it is not proved. So is the evidence for its truth good? Should we gather evidence for and against it, as if it were a defendant in a court of law? Since the Hypothesis has the same logical form as "All swans are white," the most direct sort of evidence comes from calculating the zeros and checking if their real part is indeed a half. The zeros are ordered, so one can speak of the first one, second one, and so on. It was shown in 1903 that the first 15 zeros do have real part a half, and both people and machines have been busy since. Fifty billion is announced, but it is hard to keep track, since there is a cooperative project using spare computer time that claims to be knocking over a billion zeros a

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

day. It is one of the largest inductions in history. In such abstract areas, however, it is not surprising that there are more subtle reasons bearing on the question. Most experts are firmly convinced that the Hypothesis is true, but there still are a few skeptics. There is just a little reason to think that though there are no small counterexamples (zeros with real part not a half), there could be some very large ones, ones far beyond the reach of any feasible calculation. There is something to be said for the opinion of the mathematician George Pólya, that pure mathematics is the best place to appreciate probabilistic reasoning. For in mathematics, there are no distractions from subjective factors or laws of nature. The hypothesis confronts the evidence in pure logical space.

Will the Riemann Hypothesis be proved soon? Derbyshire takes the risk of making a fool of himself and puts his prediction on the line: no. The ideal reader of his book, then, is an obsessive fifteen-year-old genius like the young Gauss, who often spent an "idle quarter of an hour" tallying the primes in blocks of a thousand. The problem will most likely still be there when that reader is old enough to tackle it.

I spy

Robert J. Stove The Unsleeping Eye: A History of Secret Police and Their Victims. Encounter Books, 319 page, $25.95

reviewed by Anthony Daniels

My slight personal experience of arrest for political reasons has suggested to me that it as often partakes of the quality of farce as of tragedy. I was once arrested as a South African spy in Gabon, but my captor released me in return for a prescription for the syphilis from which he was suffering; I was deported under armed guard from Honduras to Sandinista Nicaragua because it was supposed that anyone who had so many books from El Salvador with him must be an inveterate enemy of Honduras (I had fondly supposed that one of the few advantages of deportation was free travel, but in fact I had to pay for my own escort); and I learned the principles of Balkan policing in a cell in Albania, where I was arrested for trying to photograph the police wading into a demonstration by communists, truncheons flying. I owed my swift release to the fact that I had lunched with a government minister shortly before, but I still didn't get my camera back. And for the sake of completeness, I should mention that the Bureau of State Security in South Africa once sought me out—serendipitously, I was a step ahead of them—and I was briefly interrogated by the Securitate at Bucharest Airport.

Considering my utter inability to harm any constituted authority, even—or especially—the most evil of them, I found my arrests absurd rather than frightening. Having been brought up in a country virtually without political persecution, I somewhat naïvely (or arrogantly) supposed that I was more or less invulnerable. But political or secret policing, especially in the twentieth century, has claimed the lives of millions of people. My personal experience of it has not, alas, been representative.

In this book, the Australian historian and music critic Robert Stove recounts the stories of five examples of secret policing's genre: Francis Walsingham in Elizabethan England, Joseph Fouché in Napoleonic France, the various incarnations and bosses of the Tcheka in Soviet Russia, the various agents of internal security in Nazi Germany, and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI in twentieth-century America. In view of the extent of the ground he has covered, it is hardly surprising that his narratives should be fast-paced and engrossing, but the corresponding disadvantage is that they are rather superficial. His sources are easily available secondary ones, his book a work of deft collation rather than original research.

Needless to say, secret policing is most

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

urgent and ruthless in highly ideological regimes, in which active participation rather than passive acquiescence is required of the people, and where lack of such participation is taken as evidence of political unreliability. In regimes that require only lack of open opposition, the secret police terrorize mainly intellectuals and the political classes; in ideological regimes, they terrorize everyone, the secret police themselves included. Those who live by denunciation die by denunciation.

Sometimes Mr. Stove's historiographical method seems to me to be questionable. In his just detestation of Communism, he underestimates the oppressiveness of Tsarism. Merely because Lenin managed in a few weeks to execute more people than the Romanov dynasty had in the previous two centuries, it does not follow that Russia in the nineteenth century was a paragon of freedom. The tradition of incarcerating critics of the regime as lunatics had its origin with Radischev; Turgenev, the mildest of men, was condemned to exile; as Mr. Stove himself points out, Dostoyevsky was reprieved from the death penalty at the very last moment. The Jews were granted every freedom worth having only after the February Revolution; and you have only to read Custine (among others) to understand how oppressive was Russia under Nicholas I. And it is certainly news to me that the role of the Okhrana, the Tsar's secret police, in the elaboration of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* has been refuted: a surprising assertion for which no reference is given.

The problem is that, while history is written backwards, life is lived forwards: and life in Tsarist Russia would have seemed free to those who lived it only if they knew what was going to happen afterwards, which of course they didn't. Even a truly prophetic mind such as Dostoyevsky's (not free of great flaws) foretold what would happen only *if* those who have been called the epileptics of the revolution overcame the paralytics of the regime: he did not regard it as inevitable, for otherwise he would scarcely have issued his warning. The advent to power of his Devils was an event unprecedented in history (unless you count the Jacobins as forming a prelude), and was the perverse and perverted reductio of Enlightenment ideals. It changed everything forever.

Henceforth, every tolerably democratic regime would be faced by the possibility that within its midst there might be intellectuals who were actively seeking to bring about the same cataclysm that had occurred in Russia. And indeed there were such intellectuals: as Mr. Stove points out, Senator McCarthy (whose clumsiness and personal qualities he deplores) underestimated Soviet attempts to win friends and influence people in the United States. McCarthy's baleful legacy was to give truth a bad name.

Mr. Stove does not take up the challenge of discussing in a general way the scope of the legitimate powers of secret surveillance in a democratic state: a question that is obviously all the more urgent in the light of September 11. To take one example: both Britain and France now have in their midst large populations whose loyalty to, or even its absence of hatred for, the host country cannot be assumed, and whose integration into that country's society has been actively retarded and opposed by the doctrines of multiculturalism. You have only to see a group of men from the North West Frontier gathering outside a Victorian terraced house in Bradford converted into a mosque, whose only obvious concession to Occidentalism is the wearing of Nike shoes and the possession of a mobile phone, to wonder what exactly they believe, think, and preach, and whether the secret service can possibly be—for linguistic and other reasons—on top of the situation. Moreover, this population, in the name of certain liberal abstractions and shibboleths, is able constantly to replenish itself with new migrants, so that the need to integrate never arises: a huge ghetto, potentially hostile, is created that is self-sustaining. An outside observer might conclude from this that the host society suffers from a profound death-

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

wish, composed of a strange admixture of self-hatred and over-confidence that it is so unshakably strong that nothing could destroy or seriously undermine it.

Of course, as with any population, the great majority will be law-abiding and far removed from any notions of violence or terrorism: but they will be penalized by the suspicion aroused by the militants among them. The unfairness of this will no doubt drive some of them into the militants' camp: you might as well be hanged for a bomb as a veil. And yet, to pretend that there is no danger at all, and therefore to do nothing, would be self-betrayal on an impressive scale. Herein lies the dilemma of secret policing in a liberal democracy.

It helps for such a democracy to have a definite and identifiable enemy, preferably in the form of a hostile state. When liberal democracies, led by the United States, were engaged in a titanic struggle with the Soviet Union and its satellites, matters were relatively simple. Even so, the unmasking of many Soviet agents of influence required the opening of the Moscow archives: our secret services had, if anything, been naïve in their assessment of radicals and Soviet sympathizers. Things were worse than anyone had supposed.

As the enemy becomes less well defined, so paranoia is inclined to set in. Paranoia never lies far below the surface of human life: it is a little-remarked phenomenon that many defects of the brain lead to persecutory ideas, as if trust were only a thin neurological veneer, an evolutionary afterthought, easily destroyed by the slightest circumstances to reveal a more reptilian attitude to the world. A protean enemy, simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, with an indefinite organization and a shadowy existence, poses a threat to our liberties because we don't know how to combat it, and might therefore adopt inappropriately (and inefficient) draconian measures.

Mr. Stove does not address these problems directly, but they are implicit in the book. J. Edgar Hoover recognized them, at least at first, but the long exercise of power led him to overstep the mark, and to accumulate information to preserve his own position. By the time of his death, everyone of prominence was potentially an enemy, no matter his actual record, from Earl Browder to Senator Helms.

When surveillance grows too extensive, however, information becomes noise. At first, the knowledge that everyone is being watched is frightening: but there comes a time, eventually, when the realization dawns that the information gathered is so vast in quantity that it is beyond the capacity of anyone to analyze it or ascribe it proper weight. A gestalt switch occurs, and what was formerly terrifying suddenly becomes ridiculous. The history of surveillance is also the history of the failure of surveillance, however many victims might have been sacrificed to it in the meantime.

Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The fantasies of Noam Chomsky *by Keith Windschuttle*
The achievement of Stefan George *by John Simon*
The vocal recital today *by Patrick J. Smith*
How good was Theodore Dreiser? *by Jeffrey Hart*
Fiction chronicle *by Max Watman*

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Letters

Another Tony

To the Editors:

In response to John Gross's interesting account of the current mood in London ("A Tale of Two Tonies," March 2003), I should like to point out that there are British pro-American conservatives who are, nonetheless, opposed to the war on Iraq for sound conservative reasons. We do not think it is in America's interests or in British interests. In my case, I am not convinced that this will be a just war as defined by the Christian faith, nor am I convinced that the good conservative policies of deterrence and containment should be so lightly abandoned. I do not believe that there is anything conservative about war, which was the handmaiden and herald of state control and socialism throughout the twentieth century. And I fear that licensing preemptive war aimed at achieving regime change has serious implications for the conservative concept of national sovereignty. Interestingly, Anthony Blair, who now seems beyond criticism in the United States (to the despair of many British conservatives, who see him as a menace to liberty and as the leader of the most rapaciously redistributive and anti-middle class socialist government here since 1945), is not what many Americans think him to be. He is not exactly a man with a long record of stoutly defending his own country's interests against foreign threats or terrorism. He was an adult supporter of unilateral nuclear disarmament at the height of the Cold War. He opposed Margaret Thatcher's decision to retake the Falkland Islands after Argentina's aggression, preferring a negotiated solution. And he has recently arranged Britain's abject surrender to the well-armed Irish Republican Army, who unquestionably pose a direct threat to Britain and who have not been required to lay down a single submachine gun before, during, or after this surrender. Even Hans Blix might balk at such behaviour, if anyone were to invite him to inspect it. He is also anxious to give away the British possession of Gibraltar to Spain, despite the near-unanimous opposition of the inhabitants of Gibraltar to this plan. And of course he is a near-fanatical supporter of the project to dissolve British national sovereignty in a European Federal State. He has done much to promote the creation of a European Army, and hopes to secure the abolition of British economic independence through the merger of the Pound Sterling with the Euro. He is on the record (in a speech in Chicago during the Kosovo affair) as a supporter of liberal imperialism, the use of force to remake the world in a way that pleases the consciences of left-wingers. I suspect that, and a general scorn for the idea of national sovereignty, may have helped his enthusiasm for the attack on Iraq. As for deterrence or containment, we know he does not believe in those, at least not when applied to the USSR. Perhaps Mr. Blair understands the nature of the war in Iraq better than some American conservatives.

Yours in some puzzlement,

Peter Hitchens
Oxford, England

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Poetic licence

To the Editors:
I wish to thank William Logan for the time and effort expended in his review of my recent book, *Early Occult Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* ("The real language of men," December 2002). However, the review contains a few factual errors that I would like to correct.

He says that my previous book, *The Art of the Lathe*, was "praised for its sentimental account of working life." Actually, it was praised for its "UNsentimental account of working life." This was the common theme that ran through the reviews and awards statements here and in England. He also comments that "there's nothing wrong with making noble figures of factory workers," and proceeds to speak of communist boilermakers, coal miners, and shepherds. There are no factory workers in this book or any of my poems. Mr. Logan has confused a factory with a machine shop, and the difference is profound. Historically, factory workers have generally been unskilled laborers performing the same task repeatedly in a production line. The workers in a machine shop—in particular the oilfield machine shops in which my father worked—are highly skilled laborers engaged in repair work of a frequently complex nature. They are capable of heroic acts of craft (I once saw my father and two apprentices put together an entire oil rig from spare parts, certainly an heroic act, if one knows anything about such work) and of physical courage and endurance, which I also witnessed on numerous occasions.

It would certainly be possible for that deskbound critic in whose consciousness a factory is indistinguishable from a machine shop and all working people are pretty much alike to think that to speak of such acts truthfully is simply to "romanticize" the labors of a factory worker performing repetitive tasks. Mr. Logan refers in passing to the "deskbound poet whose nearest brush with hard labor comes, these days, from what he sees in the movies." However this may apply to Mr. Logan, I would not want *New Criterion* readers to think it of me; I worked in an oilfield machine shop for twelve years and feel qualified to speak of it truly.

Mr. Logan leaves the impression—unintentional, I'm sure—that machine shops and industrial labor are, with only a couple of exceptions, the sole subject of my book. In fact, most of the poems deal with a wide variety of subjects and settings unrelated to such matters.

Thank you very much.

B. H. Fairchild
Claremont, California

William Logan replies
Why, only this afternoon I had a hammer in hand. When I wrote, "There's nothing wrong with making noble figures of factory workers," I had finished with machinists and was referring to other workers likely to be romanticized, factory workers as well as coal miners and shepherds. Mr. Fairchild obviously doesn't care to have his father's men (whom in his poems he characterizes as giants and Vulcans) confused with mere factory hands, but perhaps they enjoy less a profound difference than just a difference—he does seem eager to establish class distinctions, as if unskilled laborers were beneath contempt, incapable of the "heroic" acts of machinists. If Mr. Fairchild wants it known that his father's machine shop was not a factory, I'm all for it; but to call building an oil rig from spare parts heroic is, alas, only part of his problem with exaggeration.

About thirty years ago, as a young man, Mr. Fairchild labored in a machine shop. Now he is, now he has been for some time, a desk-bound poet romanticizing his "heroic" past. I'm amused that he thinks it a factual error to have said his previous book was "praised for its sentimental account of working life." Critics often welcome as unsentimental something sentimental as my late grandmother's needlepoint. Anyone but Mr. Fairchild, who embraces humorlessness like wet laundry, might have understood that I was making a quiet joke.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Announcing Boston Review's *Sixth Annual*

POETRY CONTEST

Deadline: June 1, 2003

First Prize: $1,000

Guidelines:

Submit up to five previously unpublished poems, no more than 10 pages total.
Submit in duplicate with a cover letter.
Name, address, and phone number on cover letter, not on the poems themselves.
Simultaneous submissions allowed if notify *Boston Review* of acceptance elsewhere.
Submissions will not be returned.
$15 entry fee, check/money order payable to *Boston Review*.

Send entries to:

Poetry Contest, *Boston Review*, E53-407 MIT, Cambridge, MA 02139.

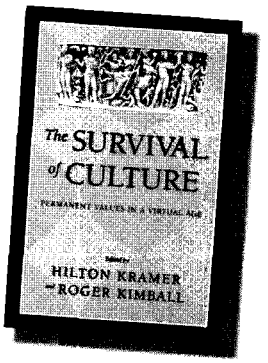
Winning poet will be published in *Boston Review*.
All entrants will receive a one-year subscription.

A critical fever chart of our age

HILTON KRAMER AND ROGER KIMBALL, EDITORS

The Survival of Culture

Permanent Values in a Virtual Age



In these important and wide-ranging essays drawn from *The New Criterion*, ten distinguished critics reflect on the direction of our society, emphasizing the dangers that threaten our institutions as well as the vivifying survivals that are worth cherishing and nurturing. The contributors include Robert H. Bork, Anthony Daniels, Martin Greenberg, Roger Kimball, Kenneth Minogue, Eric Ormsby, David Pryce-Jones, Diana Schaub, Mark Steyn, and Keith Windschuttle. Vividly written, these reflections are guaranteed to spark controversy and debate.

Just published in hardcover and paperback

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher

www.ivanrdee.com

Chicago • A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
At your bookseller, or order toll-free 1-800-462-6420 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

PARTISAN REVIEW
SPRING 2003

A Tribute to William Phillips, Co-Founder and Editor-in-Chief

"Literary magazines, like writers, come out of a time and a place, out of some literary current or sensibility. Thus Partisan Review *was born in the thirties. . . . If it has not been restricted by its origins, if it has defied all the pressures of a time and country that have celebrated youth, novelty, and escape from traditions, I think it is mainly because of the continuity between the thirties and the following decades and because the traditions* Partisan Review *both inherited and helped form have continued to be pertinent."*

William Phillips (1907–2002)

William Phillips, who co-founded *Partisan Review* in 1934, strongly believed that the present rises out of the past and reaches into the future. He ensured that the magazine would stay on top of new trends without going overboard, while at the same time remaining aware of the historical roots of these trends.

Read the spring 2003 issue of *Partisan Review,* and find out how luminaries such as Jules Chametzky, Morris Dickstein, Helen Frankenthaler, Allen Kurzweil, Edith Kurzweil, Doris Lessing, Steven Marcus, Czeslaw Milosz, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Jules Olitski, Cynthia Ozick, Norman Podhoretz, John Silber, Roger Straus, Rosanna Warren, and many others remember William Phillips.

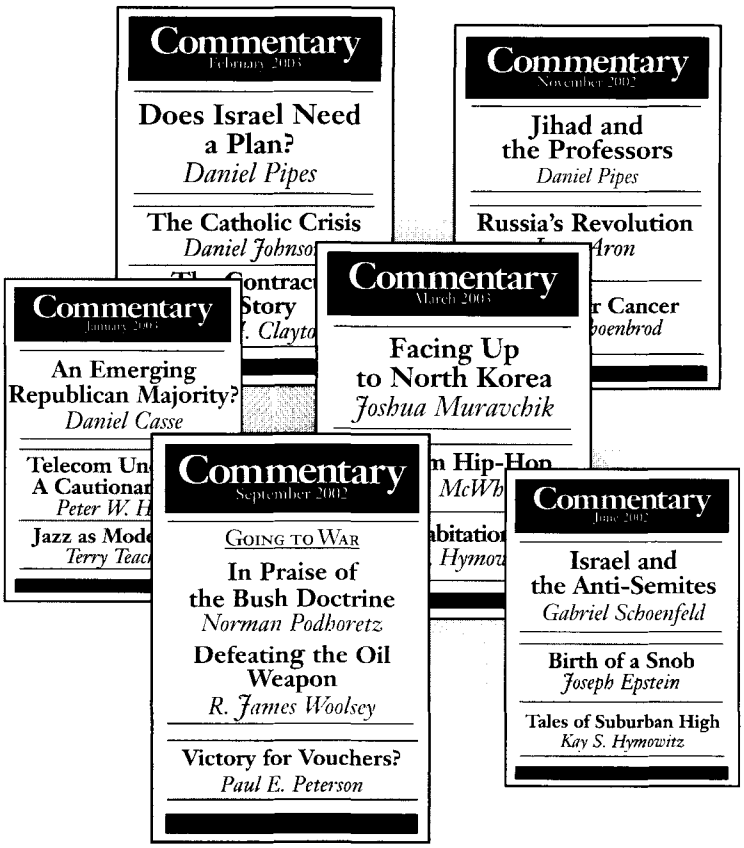
Find *Partisan Review* at select newsstands, or subscribe online at:

www.partisanreview.org

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

"Very, very important to the life of the United States, to the West, and, I am convinced, to freedom."

—*Jeane J. Kirkpatrick*



Commentary

Sound thinking for the 21st century.

$45.00 for 11 issues • Subscribe today! • $79.00 for 22 issues

Call 1 800 829-6270

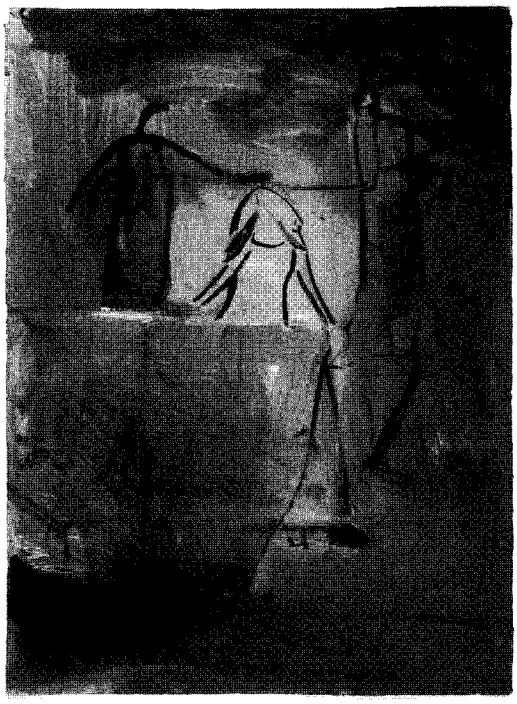
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

THE STOLEN BLESSING

PAINTINGS BY

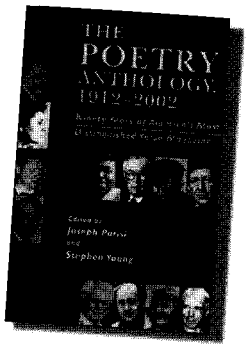
JOHN BRADFORD

APRIL 8 - MAY 3



MAURICE ARLOS FINE ART
85 FRANKLIN ST
NEW YORK, NY 10013
TEL 212.965.5466
FAX 212.965.5468
TUESDAY-SATURDAY 11-6
www.artnet.com/mauricearlos.html

An American keepsake...the new 90th anniversary collection from POETRY *magazine*



JOSEPH PARISI AND STEPHEN YOUNG, EDITORS

THE POETRY ANTHOLOGY, 1912–2002

"The histories of poetry and *Poetry* in America are almost interchangeable, certainly inseparable," wrote A. R. Ammons. This bountiful new anthology from America's most distinguished magazine of verse includes virtually every notable poet of the last nine decades: Yeats, Eliot, Masters, Pound, Frost, Lawrence, Millay, Lindsay, Graves, Moore, Hughes, Auden, Spender, Crane, Robert Penn Warren, Williams, Thomas, cummings, Brooks, Merrill, Ashbery, Bishop, Lowell, Jeffers, Roethke, Shapiro, Sexton, Gunn, Berryman, Plath, Kumin, Hughes, Rich, Heaney, Collins—and many, many more.

Just published —a great book to own and to give

Ivan R. Dee, Publisher
www.ivanrdee.com
Chicago • A Member of the Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group
At your bookseller, or order toll-free 1-800-462-6420 with a major credit card.

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Please join

The New Criterion for a special

Poetry Reading & Reception

in recognition of

National Poetry Month &

"Poets on Poetry: a special section"

from the April 2003 issue

★

Guest Readers:

David Barber

Ben Downing

Adam Kirsch

Eric Ormsby

David Yezzi

★

April 17, 2003

New York Studio School

of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture

8 West 8th St.

(between 5th & 6th Avenues)

New York, NY

★

Cocktails at 6:30

Reading begins at 7:00

RSVP to Dawn Steeves Email: steeves@newcriterion.com *Phone:* (212) 247-6980

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

NEW YORK STUDIO SCHOOL
OF DRAWING, PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

Students at the New York Studio School draw, paint and sculpt for at least forty hours per week, while exploring the necessary issues in becoming serious contemporary artists with a strong historical background.

For information about our 3-year Certificate Program, two-week Drawing Marathon, Evening and Saturday courses, and Evening Lecture Series, contact the enrollment office or visit us on-line.

UPCOMING:

DRAWING MARATHONS
June 16 - June 27, 2003
and
September 29 - October 10, 2003

SUMMER SESSION
June 16 - August 1, 2003

FALL SESSION
September 29, 2003 - January 30, 2004

8 WEST 8 STREET NEW YORK NY 10011
TEL 212 673 6466 • FAX 212 777 2906 • WWW.NYSS.ORG

The New Criterion
850 Seventh Avenue
Suite 400
New York NY 10019

Periodicals Postage
Paid at New York, NY
and at additional
Mailing Offices

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED